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Standing Alone in the Corner of a Room with 5 Million Other People: Is New Zealand a Lonely Place for its Rangatahi?

It would be unrealistic to feel content all the time, but is it normal to constantly feel lonely? I moved to New Zealand from India in 2017, and ever since I've felt a strong sense of disconnect from those around me. Don't get me wrong, I have a stable group of friends, the same loving family I had in India, I'm a school prefect who's constantly involved and interacting with everyone, but I still feel alone - more than any rangatahi should.

Now, I assumed this was because I uprooted my life at the age of 12 to move to the country that promised purity, and happiness, the country that was "the best place in the world for children and young people."[1] I assumed the devastating feeling of loneliness only resided within those who moved here, because it wasn't their own country, because they had to leave all they knew to live in the 'promised land' only to feel empty and distant. But when I started talking about the way I felt to my other friends, I quickly realised that I'm not the only one. Almost every single one of my peers feel or have felt lonely, even those born in New Zealand. Studies show 40% of the teenage population that has been calling New Zealand their home since they first opened their eyes feel loneliness.[2] I continued to ponder over why and how this is. How is it that all 1.6 million of us rangatahi collectively feel lonely? Why do we feel this way? What factors contribute to this? How can we overcome this as a country?

[1] Child and Youth Wellbeing. 2019. "Our Aspirations | Child and Youth Wellbeing." Www.childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz. 2019. https://www.childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz/our-aspirations

[2] Stats NZ. 2020. "Loneliness Rising among New Migrants in NZ." NZ Herald. 2020. https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/loneliness-rising-among-new-migrants-in-new-zealand/ZLMLEMCLZOFWVUEALAKZAQLSWU/.

Are we lonely?

In 350 B.C.E, Aristotle wrote: "Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human."[3] Through this, Aristotle very blatantly exposed the foundation of human nature to humans themselves.

Aristotle helps us realise that humans are designed to crave external interaction, a sense of belonging, and everything else that fulfils this integral aspect of humanity. It is who we are by the law of nature, and depriving ourselves of such a fundamental need is extremely detrimental and in some cases fatal. The areas responsible for communication (Broca's and Wernicke's) in our brains were developed through evolution for a reason. From tribes, settlements, and families, to friendships, we have proved over generations and generations that we are nothing if not a species that survives best with the company and support of others. But what happens if we turn our backs on the very thing that comprises society - interconnectedness?

Stats NZ conducted a study in 2018 and horrifyingly concluded that "In the past four weeks more than 650,000 Kiwis have felt lonely."[4] With the significant decline in the country's mental health over the past four years, we can accurately expect the amount of Kiwis that feel lonely to have increased since the 2018 study. Why is it that even in a population of over 5 million people, a vast number of us will feel isolated and alone? It feels as though we're in a room full of people - even those we're close with - but are still compelled to stand in the corner and feel the burdening distance between ourselves and others.

[3]Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2016. "Aristotle: Politics | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2016. https://iep.utm.edu/aristotle-politics/.

[4] Loneliness NZ. 2018. "Many Kiwis Feel Lonely." Loneliness NZ. 2018. https://loneliness.org.nz/nz/facts/many-kiwis-feel-lonely

Being a teenager is most commonly associated with going out, partying, and hanging out with friends, but are healthy relationships for teenagers promoted in our country? Society has been so focused on moving forward and developing further in other aspects of society that we have collectively continued to ignore the significance of interconnectedness within society and have consequently dug ourselves the hole of isolation for rangatahi so deep that we don't even remember the world above. I argue that New Zealand as a country and society is a lonely place for youth and this significantly contributes to the deterioration of interconnectedness in our society as a whole.

A dissertation by medical researchers in 2019 concluded that isolation and loneliness are scientifically proven to be just as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.[5] Now, if our country could start multiple campaigns like 'QuitStrong' or 'Smokefree' to stop its population from smoking, and start other programmes to prevent addiction to smoking, why isn't it doing anything to protect and save its rangatahi from the destruction that isolation fosters? Why hasn't it accomplished the creation of programmes to successfully save its youth from suffocating in the hole that as a society we collectively dug? I acknowledge that there are a couple of strategies in place to protect the rangatahi of Aotearoa, but are they actually effective? An example is the Government's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy launched in 2018 that aims to make the country "the best place in the world" for youth.[6] The Strategy's six main expected hua includes ensuring that children feel "Loved, safe and nurtured", are "Happy and healthy", "Accepted, respected and connected", "Have what they need", are "Learning and developing", and are "Involved and empowered".[7] While all that sounds incredible and suggests progress in

[5] Ortiz-Ospina, Esteban. 2019. "How Important Are Social Relations for Our Health and Well-Being?" Our World in Data. 2019. https://ourworldindata.org/social-relations-health-and-well-being.

[6] Child and Youth Wellbeing. 2018. "About Us | Child and Youth Wellbeing." Www.childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz. 2018. https://www.childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz/about.

[7] 2018b. "Outcomes | Child and Youth Wellbeing." Www.childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz. 2018. https://www.childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz/our-aspirations/strategy-framework/outcomes.

the wellbeing of NZ youth, after closely examining the Strategy's method of measuring their success I criticise its accuracy and credibility.

The first issue with the Strategy is that it is not widely promoted and they do not appear to collect a broad enough sample to generate their data. The Strategy makes the survey 'The Youth Health and Wellbeing Survey - 'WhatAboutMe?' available to random "samples" of the population sometime in the school year and uses the results as "indicators" to help them analyse the hua and compare results, which they then publish as reports available to the public. Firstly, who even knows about this survey? I know I didn't; but I gave them the benefit of doubt and thought I was just ignorant and didn't realise the government was actively taking care of their rangatahi. However, when I asked my peers, *who all access the internet almost every minute of the day*, they all said they were unaware of the Strategy itself. Most rangatahi know about the campaigns created to help combat drug addiction in New Zealand, but that's because they are talked about and promoted throughout the country. The Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy on the other hand is barely discussed, let alone the survey that is the main measure of the Strategy's success. So if those with constant internet access (and presumably more privileged than many others in New Zealand which my peers and I are) do not know about a survey meant to help them, how can we expect those not as privileged to? The lack of access that the population has to this survey along with their sample size is what lowers the accuracy of the results. The Strategy informs us that they have collected under 8,000 samples to collect data from and analyse them further.[8] As aforementioned, there are about 1.6 million of us rangatahi in Aotearoa, and if only 0.005% of the population is represented, then how are we supposed to trust the results of this survey, let alone trust that our government is taking effective action to help and protect the children they promised to? This leads me to argue that the statistics on the

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[8] What About Me. 2021. "What about Me - the Biggest Survey of Your Generation." Www.whataboutme.nz. 2021. https://www.wh.ataboutme.nz/.

annual reports are merely numbers fitted into a box rather than a representation of the actual children the country is responsible for.

Importance of Connection

While Merriam Webster defines connection as "relation of personal intimacy"[9], I perceive connection as the thread of humanity that stitches the very fabric of society together. To put such a significant aspect of human nature into four simple words seems to understate the significance. We have collectively failed to acknowledge the significant power and place of interconnectedness in our society.

Building connections and healthy relationships with those around us enhances our wellbeing immensely. Using the Whare Tapa Whā model of Hauora formed by Dr Mason Durie in 1984, it can be argued and proven that connection does indeed have a positive impact on one's overall hauora.[10] The obvious direct impact is on the social wellbeing (Taha Whanau)[11] as it consequently increases one's sense of belonging, makes them feel supported, and as a result helps nourish the other aspects of wellbeing. Feeling connected relieves the stress that almost every teenager unnecessarily takes on - Do they even like me? Am I too much? Am I enough? Having stable relationships and the ability to connect with others helps soothe our mental and emotional wellbeing (Taha Hinegaro)[9], creating time for us to indulge in other activities rather than expending our energy feeling lonely and worrying about our relationships with others. This will lead to an improvement in our spiritual well being (Taha Wairua)[12] as the sense of fulfilment a teenager derives from social connection will help increase their self-esteem, and consequently

[9] Webster, Merriam. 2018. "Definition of CONNECTION." Merriam-Webster.com. 2018. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/connection.

[10] Mental Health Organization NZ. n.d. "Te Whare Tapa Whā." Mentalhealth.org.nz. https://mentalhealth.org.nz/te-whare-tapa-wha#:~:text=Te%20Whare%20Tapa%20Wh%C4%81%20was.

[11] Living Well. 2021. "Connect with Others for Mental Wellbeing | Mental Health Strategies." Living Well. 2021. https://livingwell.org.au/well-being/five-ways-to-mental-wellbeing/connect-with-others/.

[12] Psychology Today. 2020. "Social Connection Boosts Health, Even When You're Isolated | Psychology Today New Zealand." Www.psychologytoday.com. 2020. https://www.psychologytoday.com/nz/blog/feeling-it/202003/social-connection-boosts-health-even-when-youre-isolated.

uplift their attitude towards day-to-day life along with reinforcing positive values and beliefs about self and those around them. Not so surprisingly, the combination of these beneficial improvements in a teenager's hauora also enhances their physical wellbeing (Taha Tinana) as well as promoting positive changes evident through a biophysical lens. Multiple studies and research prove that social interaction promotes the release of endorphins and dopamine, commonly known as "feel good" neurotransmitters and therefore explains the uplifted mood.[13] Steve Cole is a neurologist and genomist, currently working at UCLA, and discovered another biophysical change caused by social interactions that can be observed through the alteration in the genes responsible for immunity, consequently improving our immune system and increasing our longevity by 50%.[14] Therefore, it is clear that interconnectedness has multiple important benefits for rangatahi.

If connection can have such a positive impact on an individual's wellbeing, imagine the harm the lack of connection can have on teenagers, the loneliest age group in New Zealand. It would accentuate the burdening distance between them and those around them, resulting in the loss of support and comfort. This will not only weaken their social wellbeing (Taha Whanau) but also consequently shake the stability of the other walls of the Whare Tapa Whā model of hauora. It would be expected that loneliness would most significantly impact the mental and emotional wellbeing (Taha Hinegaro) of rangatahi by being "a potential antecedent" in the increasing likelihood of experiencing depression and anxiety symptoms.[15] While these mental health problems can potentially affect the teenager in the long term by inducing suicidal thoughts, the long-term impact loneliness has on one's physical wellbeing (Taha Tinana) is rather more alarming. Dr. Novotony's psychology PhD research found that social isolation is linked to

[13] Human Performances Resources. 2022. "Social Fitness and Performance – Part 1: Impact on Brain and Overall Health." HPRC. 2022. https://www.hprc-online.org/total-force-fitness/tff-strategies/social-fitness-and-performance-part-1-impact-brain-and-overall#:~:text=%E2%9E%A4%2 0Social%20interactions%20promote%20the.

[14] Cole, Steven W. 2013. "Social Regulation of Human Gene Expression: Mechanisms and Implications for Public Health." *American Journal of Public Health* 103 (S1): S84–92. https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2012.301183.

[15] M.H, Lim. 2016. "APA PsycNet." Psycnet.apa.org. 2016. https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2016-21271-001?doi=1.

"impaired executive function, accelerated cognitive decline, poor cardiovascular function and impaired immunity at every stage of life."[16] The research discusses the dangers of social isolation and how it can cause severe consequences on one's physical wellbeing. Other studies conclude that loneliness is so dangerous that it puts you at risk for heart diseases, type 2 diabetes, arthritis, and Alzheimer's disease.[17] The severity of such effects highlight how social isolation can result in further detrimental side effects that are likely to continue to harm that teenager even when they're an adult. This only further emphasises the significance and urgency of this issue and how long-lasting its effects can be. Morever, PhD researcher, Julianne Holt-Lunstad, found that loneliness increases the chances of mortality by 26%.[18]It's time we realise this is a wake up call for us and finally take effective action to address the issue of loneliness for teenagers because it's directly affecting their life. Feeling lonely also impacts a teenager's spiritual wellbeing (Taha Wairua) by being a significant factor in the decrease of one's self esteem due to the lack of connection decreasing their sense of worth and compelling them to question their ability to connect with others. This not only damages their perception of themselves but also of the world around them as they become doubtful of others and fail to view life through an optimistic lens - something someone with fulfilling connections would.

These statistics urge us to take action. Our action so far has been a couple of strategies that publish annual reports with half boxes empty because the data is "not yet available" or use vague diction such as "most" or "few" which only further weakens the credibility of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy. The lack of concrete evidence and findings over the past four years is rather shocking and leads me to believe that not enough is being done to effectively protect rangatahi in New Zealand. I argue that investigating the roots of the problem is what will lead us to the solution.

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[16] Hawkley, Louise C., and John P. Capitanio. 2015. "Perceived Social Isolation, Evolutionary Fitness and Health Outcomes: A Lifespan Approach." Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences 370 (1669): 20140114. https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2014.0114.

[17] Loneliness NZ. 2018a. "Health Effects of Loneliness." Loneliness NZ. 2018. https://loneliness.org.nz/loneliness/health-effects/.

[18] Holt-Lunstad, Julianne, Timothy B. Smith, Mark Baker, Tyler Harris, and David Stephenson. 2015. "Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality." Perspectives on Psychological Science 10 (2): 227–37. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614568352.

So, who's to blame?

It would be incorrect and unjustified for me to declare that New Zealand is the only country in the world that is lonely; feeling lonely is a universal experience. Clark E. Moustakas even expresses this through The Existential Approach[19] and argues that it is a fact that all humans at their core are lonely at the end of the day as we are the only ones that truly know what's happening in our lives; we are our sole companions through the journey of life. While this approach is valid and supported by many, I argue that it is not the path to a solution, it is only a theory that allows people to take no action and not be instilled with guilt for sitting on the couch, blissfully ignorant of the ways loneliness affects everyone. It is only a theory that applies a pessimistic lens to life and scares people rather than provide the comfort that can be derived from true connections.

Instead, I'd like to examine Carl Rogers' Phenomenological Perspective.[17] His theory suggests that by human nature we all try our best to fit in and be accepted by others, and often shape ourselves to meet societal expectations, even if it means hiding our most authentic selves. The need to feel accepted in society that Rogers outlines is instantly proven by one of the hua of the Strategy as it highlights the need for youth to be "accepted, respected, and connected". Carl Rogers then continues to explain that having to *act* a certain way rather than just *be* furthers the distance between self, and as a result, others because we begin to try and connect to false portrayals of individuals rather than the raw realities that would otherwise naturally promote real connections.

'Teenagehood' is often misleading, overly exaggerated, and not *that* great. We're frequently reminded by the adults in our lives, "Oh it's the best time in your life!", and "You need to really live and hold onto this time," but is it really that great? The overwhelming desire to feel wanted and accepted is usually at its peak during this age because we're all trying to figure out who

[19] Perlman, Daniel. 1982. "Theoretical Approaches to Loneliness." Research Gate. 1982.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284634633_Theoretical_approaches_to_loneliness.

we are while still in the habit of wanting to be a part of something as a collective. It is simply unrealistic to expect that every single person is the same, but we all somehow end up in this glorified pattern of "fitting in" by cutting parts of ourselves out and glueing foreign aspects in just so we become a part of the big picture. By applying the Phenomenological Perspective, we can understand that this is because society as a whole puts immense pressure on young children and teenagers to be a certain way and fit into categories or clichés in order to have a place in said "big picture". Whether it be the *jock* or the *nerd*, we're all conditioned to follow the characteristics of a "social category"[20] constantly fueled by society, culture, gender roles, and media, and continued by teenagers. Carl Rogers then strengthens his argument and discusses that the only reason we feel lonely is because the "discrepancy between one's true inner self and the self manifested to others"[19] becomes significantly wide, leaving abundant distance between us and those around us - inhibiting any potential to connect with the realities of two individuals. As a teenager myself, I wholeheartedly feel the burdening pressure of having to be a perfect person, to do everything according to the book just so I can feel a sense of belonging and acceptance in New Zealand's society - especially as an immigrant that is constantly trying to prove something, to show that she is worth being a part of the big picture. So I learnt very quickly how to portray myself in a manner that makes me seem less *nerdy* in certain groups and smarter in others - just so I can go home to my hardworking parents and say "Yeah I had some really great conversations today," even if it meant changing parts of my personality to better suit those around me. And sometimes, I do have great conversations, just not without the societal mask that gets in the way of showing who I *really* am and connecting with who the other person *really* is. One side of the coin may be that certain expectations are forced upon the youth of society, including NZ youth, but consider the other side - teenagers give in and continue the destructive pattern that only gives power to stereotypic mentality and allows it the space to grow and haunt even the best of us. This raises the question: are teenagers somewhat to blame too?

[20] Schall, Jacqueline, Tanner LeBaron Wallace, and Vichet Chhuon. 2014. "'Fitting In' in High School: How Adolescent Belonging Is Influenced by Locus of Control Beliefs." *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 21 (4): 462–75. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2013.866148.

Perhaps if we all collectively decide to just be who we are rather than get stuck in the loop of trying to conform to stereotypes and societal expectations just so we all feel *"accepted, respected, and connected"*, we have a chance of breaking free - as a united rangatahi population in Aotearoa. Perhaps if we stop feeding the monsters that are societal myths and archetypes, we'll be able to create a sense of belonging for every teenager in New Zealand, leaving no one feeling lonely.

However, teenagers and societal pressures aren't the only factors to blame; the dangerously increasing screen time of every teenager has been known to be part of the problem too. The genomist, Dr. Steve Cole, who found that loneliness has the ability to alter one's gene code, strongly believes that "the more time we spend on [social media], the less time we spend face to face." and is a factor when discussing loneliness in teenagers.[21] While I do not villainise social media and acknowledge its role in connecting people across the world, I do agree with Dr. Cole in realising that social media along with other forms of media (ie. books, films, tv series etc.) contribute to distancing teenagers from those around them and can lead to the inevitable feelings of loneliness. He suggests that social media restricts our abilities to connect with people without a screen between them - it's as if they have forgotten *how* to connect with others unless they're not using their fingers to scroll and text. How conflicting - the smartest species who were able to technologically advance so far that the tools made to connect us have ended up causing the disappearance of our ability to connect altogether.

The graph on the right displays the results from a survey conducted in 2021 after the COVID-19 pandemic and analysed the relationship between teenagers and social media at a global scale. They

FIGURE A. Total entertainment screen use among tweens and teens, per day, 2015 to 2021
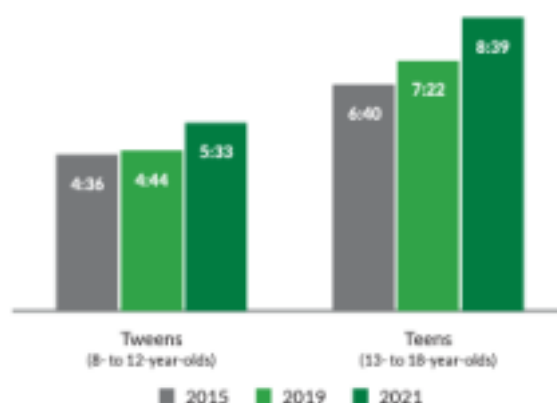
[21] Cole, Steve. 2018. "Dr. Steve Cole on Loneliness." NIH News in Health. July 27, 2018. https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2018/08/dr-steve-cole-loneliness.

concluded that the average teenager spends "8 hours and 39 minutes" on their screens excluding the screen time for homework.[22]If a young teenager spends more than a quarter of their day on their screens, disconnected with everyone physically around them, how can we expect them to find enough time to socialise "irl" (in-real-life) and value the connection? Through his argument, Dr. Cole reinforces the irony in the idea that social media and screen time has caused us to drift further from others by restricting the face to face interactions that would otherwise fulfil the human need for connection more efficiently while also triggering the 'happy' neurotransmitters previously discussed. While the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy does address that "access to smartphones has made big differences to young people's relationships, connections and the way they see themselves,"[23]the strategy fails to effectively address a recovery plan from a socio-physical disconnected point of view. A news report in 2021 informed - *warned* - the public that "Our teens spend 42 hours a week online on average - more than double what they spent in 2012."[24] This should be viewed as an alarming statistic that requires instantaneous action as "it's some of the heaviest internet use in the OECD, behind only Denmark, Sweden and Chile."[24] The Strategy's lack of inclusion of such a significant aspect in a New Zealand's teenager day-to-day life only furthers my scepticism about New Zealand as a country taking real action to save its rangatahi from metaphorically smoking 15 cigarettes a day. This emphasises the need to raise awareness of this issue and to take urgent action, starting at home. Parents could be advised to enforce strict guidelines in regards to screen time for older teenagers and incentivise minimal screen time for younger generations in order to increase their availability and time to socialise face to face - helping reduce feelings of loneliness as well as encourage connection with those around them.

[22] The Common Sense Census. 2021. "The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens."
https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_0.pdf.

[23] Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy. 2019. "Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy."

[24] NewsHub. 2021. "Quarter of Kiwi Kids Spend over Six Hours a Day on Screens outside of School." *Newshub*, 2021, sec. Shows.
https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/shows/2021/06/quarter-of-kiwi-kids-spend-over-six-hours-a-day-on-screens-outside-of-school.html.

Furthermore, the media constantly feeds every teenager's residential insecurity and fear of being left alone, and as a result, consumes our sense of logic and identity, forcing us to drive towards loneliness and disappointment. The romanticization of 'teen life' can be seen through the 'coming of age' genre, invented merely for a teen audience. Coming of age literature usually "follows the development of a child or adolescent into adulthood,"[25] which is what being a teenager essentially means. However, excessive consumption of literature (especially movies and tv series) that portray "high school as exciting and crazy, going to wild parties, normalising alcohol and drugs, romanticising rivalry tropes between peers, glamourising high school relationships and wrecking relationships with parents,"[26]is what intensifies the feeling of loneliness in a teenager. Undoubtedly, the media exaggerates what it's like to be a teenager, and unnecessarily adds expectations and pressure for every teenager to experience the 'teenage dream' too. And when they fail to live the same overly-glamourised lives as fictional characters, they're bound to feel more lonely than they actually are. Movies and TV series like 'Outer Banks', 'The Summer I Turned Pretty', or 'Kissing Booth' are examples of media that fuel the desire within every teenager to experience true love and go on adventures with their fulfilling social relationships, all whilst maintaining top academic grades to get into the best universities. Albeit the storylines are merely for economical and entertainment purposes, they almost undoubtedly always lead teenagers onto the path for disappointment by showing them unrealistic fantasies of what being a teenager could be like. Media like this is a weighty influence on teenagers and unfortunately, it fails to show teenage life realistically. What most teenagers are unable to grasp onto, however, is that not living a romanticised teen dream does not make the life someone is living "boring" or "unworthy" which leads them to believe that they're missing out, consequently experiencing FOMO (fear of missing out). This induces the anxious feeling of being let down and not truly *living* after failing to meet unrealistic standards about teen life. This

[25] Literacle. 2012. "Literary Themes Coming of Age." Literary Articles. August 19, 2012. https://literacle.com/literary-themes-coming-of-age/. [26]Innecco, Nicole Pimenta. 2022. "'The Teenage Dream.'" The Epitaph. 2022. https://hhsepitaph.com/12745/arts-culture/the-teenage-dream/.

horrifyingly deceives the young minds into thinking they do not have enough resources to live a fulfilling life - discouraging them to find gratification in what they already do, and resulting in a consequential pit of feeling lonely regardless of their reality.

In summary, the romanticisation of the teen dream in literature and media sets unrealistic and fantastical expectations and standards on teenagers and expects them to perfectly manage all aspects of life - just like the protagonist does. However, it fails to realise that the youth of NZ are not fictionalised characters with superpowers - we're human beings at a complex age with other realistic barriers like an internal due at 11:59 pm that stops them from going to a party. It is these gaps that the media does not fill that forces a teenager to question what they're doing wrong, pushing them into a spiral that ends with overthinking and disappointment that they are not as fulfilled as the characters on their screen. As a result, they feel they do not have a successful love life, opportunities to go on adventures, and frequently go out with friends that never fight, leading them towards feeling more lonely than they actually are - they're just unable to match whatever teen dream fantasy calls out to them. This suggests a significant need for the promotion of media that realistically portrays the ups and downs of teen life rather than focusing on just the ups. This could be done through the production of a New Zealand TV series under the 'coming of age' genre, but rather than glamourising and fueling the already desired teen dream, it could show the real life of a teenager in New Zealand so the youth watching do not feel like they're alone and disillusioned in this chase towards the dream. The story could follow a group of teenagers across the country unaware of each other's existence whom all have different backgrounds (ie. parents, education, socio-economic scale, sex, popularity etc.) and show the different - or unsurprisingly similar - hardships they may come across and have to deal with. This would not only address the variety of dismissed issues teenagers tackle on a day-to-day basis, but also create a sense of belonging and relatability within all the teenagers in New Zealand (and perhaps even globally) instantly debunking the stereotypes and ending

the chase towards the teen dream, because we'll all eventually realise that we're in the same boat - so how can we be lonely if the other 1.6 million feel the same? This also addresses Carl Rogers' Theory by acknowledging that we're all a part of something, even if we're not the same, and further encourages the growth of individuality amongst the youth of NZ. This helps us break free of the complex conditioning of having to fit in a "social category" and finally allows us the space to express and connect from our authentic selves rather than the façade we've been presenting in order to fit the big picture.

What's it like to be a teenager in New Zealand?

So, what is it really like to be a teenager in New Zealand? While in India, being a teenager meant embracing the culture, studying, and connecting with friends and especially family, I've felt a significant difference in the teen lifestyle of New Zealand. Hyper Independency in New Zealand is extremely common among teenagers in the population. This is usually seen through the collective compulsion to break free from any sense of dependency on anyone - whether it be financial, emotional, or physical. While wanting to feel independent and free is normal, New Zealand as a country allows its rangatahi to become so independent at an early age that they forget that it's okay to rely on someone from time to time, ultimately distancing themselves from building strong relationships with those around them.

An example of a hyper-independent behaviour is the rush to become financially independent by getting a job as soon as the law allows. To my surprise, I discovered that "there is no general minimum age for employment", only some rules around working conditions which mostly restrict individuals under 15 from working freely (ie. working hours, job type etc.).[27] This practically means that a teenager can start earning from the day they turn a teenager, granted the opportunities are limited, but they are still presented with the option to work at such an early age.

[27] Employment New Zealand. n.d. "Young Employees» Employment New Zealand." Www.employment.govt.nz. https://www.employment.govt.nz/starting-employment/rights-and-responsibilities/young-employees/.

Harvard's neurology professor, Dr Frances Jensen found that even at age 15, the frontal lobe has not fully developed yet.[28] The frontal lobe is the part of the brain responsible for the ability "to plan, make decisions and judgments, formulate insight, and assess risk."[28]If such an integral part of our cognitive processes is not completely developed yet, how can we expect young children to optimally function among those who do have fully developed frontal lobes in a workforce? This emphasises the hyper-independent attitude of teenagers in New Zealand that compels them to get a job as soon as they can - even if it does not add value to their life - only to become financially independent and earn a few dollars per hour. Teenagers who prioritise working in low income jobs over their schoolwork due to the lack of foresight to see the positive result of getting good grades, consequently reduce their access to better opportunities in the future - keeping them stuck in a cycle. I endorse the idea of becoming financially independent and making money for yourself instead of having to ask for 'pocket money' but at 13? I argue that New Zealand needs to form substantial guidelines for young employees and restrict young teenagers from working at such an early age instead of fueling this toxic behaviour.

While this would help teenagers realise that it is still important to be reliant on certain individuals such as caregivers at such a young age, I acknowledge that it has limitations which include restricting children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds from working and helping their families financially. I understand that my perspective may differ from those who *have* to work in order to support their family as I realise the privilege that I have is not something all teenagers in New Zealand have too. However, we already have multiple action groups in place that mainly focus on reducing child poverty in New Zealand including the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy as well as the Child Poverty Action Group. An example of the Government's actions to provide support to families living in poverty is the Working for Families tax credit package introduced in 2004 where parents can apply to get money if they meet certain criteria that are

[28]Jensen, Frances. 2010. "Deciphering the Teenage Brain." Hms.harvard.edu. 2010. https://hms.harvard.edu/news/deciphering-teenage-brain#:~:text=Studies%20have%2C%20in%20fact%2C%20shown.

mainly based on their children.[29] This is only one example amongst many which means that raising (or forming) the minimum age to work in New Zealand would affect children living in poverty, but the other implemented actions would minimise the impact. Stopping young teenagers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds from needing to work would also help enhance their hauora by allowing them the time to socialise, get an education, and work towards breaking the poverty cycle.

Introducing financial independence at such a young age tricks the developing mind into thinking they have it under control and do not need help from their caregivers, which starts financially at first, but eventually eliminates any form of reliance and connection with their fundamental relationships. An example of this is not eating together. This distances young individuals from their own families and hinders their ability to connect to others as well as restricts any sense of belonging both at home and outside. This is supported through multiple studies that have shown that "receiving support from… family members may [induce] a greater sense of self-worth, and this enhanced self-esteem may be a psychological resource, encouraging optimism…and better mental health," strongly suggesting that connecting with family members has a significantly positive impact on one's hauora as well as the learnt ability to interact and build relationships outside the home.[30] Hyper-independency, exhibited through early employment, breeds a lack of trust and reliance on caregivers which consequently compromises their relationship, and ultimately makes teenagers feel more lonely than they have to.

Another aspect of working as a teenager is that it adds yet more pressure onto the individual to get a job, and then actually go to work whilst trying to find time to do everything else that comprises a teen dream - socialise, stay on top of school work, self-care etc. There is a sense

[29]Inland Revenue. 2021. "About Working for Families." Www.ird.govt.nz. 2021. https://www.ird.govt.nz/working-for-families/about.

[30]Thomas, Patricia A, Hui Liu, and Debra Umberson. 2017. "Family Relationships and Well-Being." *Innovation in Aging* 1 (3): 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igx025.

of urgency to get a job as soon as you become eligible for one, to earn money and be "independent" which is healthy to some extent as it promotes financial independence, but in doing so it also restricts the teenager's time to socialise and connect with people that are important to them. The lack of time to socialise intensifies the loneliness that teenagers in New Zealand feel as it inhibits any chances of truly connecting to people and maintaining relationships. The idea of wanting to fit in and conforming to societal expectations discussed in the Phenomenological Perspective can also be seen in this context by acknowledging that getting a job may not be on everyone's 'to-do list' but the societal standards and expectations from friends and family contributes to external pressure for them to get one, or even feel as though they have to get one in order to live "right" as per New Zealand's standards. While getting a job can be beneficial by helping them learn how to "cop[e] with challenging situations and difficult people…solv[e] problems and taking initiative."[31]it undoubtedly strips already-busy individuals of leisure time that could otherwise be used to hang out with friends, spend time with family, and even themselves. So, while getting a job may help individuals feel a sense of accomplishment by becoming financially independent, it widens the distance between them and everyone else in the room - simply because they do not have the time to manage all different aspects of the 'teen dream', in the first place.

The underlying philosophy of the overall hyper-independent behaviour is an "I can do it all" attitude which contributes to many of the 1.6 million rangatahi to feel burnt out, and lonely. Other aspects of being a teenager in New Zealand include partying (and drinking), completing academic work, driving, working, and most likely playing a sport at least once a week. It is without a doubt that the youth of New Zealand are usually well-rounded and have a lot on their plates, and therefore, it is urgent to teach them how to stay balanced and connected.

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[31] Ralph, Alan. 2017. "Earn, Learn, or Both? (This Blog Will Help You and Your Teen Figure It Out)." Www.triplep-Parenting.net.nz. 2017. https://www.triplep-parenting.net.nz/nz-uken/blog-and-videos/blogs-and-news/post/should-your-teenager-get-a-job/.

Working together as a *team* of 5 million

We've already established that Aotearoa is a lonely place for a teenager due to several factors, and it is necessary that we begin to work together as a "team of 5 million" if we want to develop a connected future for the country. The commonality of such a fatal problem implores us to take action that not only provides aid at the bottom of the cliff, but acts as a fence at the top, in order to prevent teenagers from falling in the first place. This would mean an action taken for the younger kids that offers the opportunity to learn social skills necessary to feel fulfilled and connected rather than fall into the pit of loneliness commonly shared amongst NZ teenagers. I believe starting with a school based action is the most beneficial as it is available across the socio-economic scale, and is a fundamental place for education and support that builds the foundation for a child and helps them grow into an adult.

If we examine the New Zealand Curriculum closely, we realise it is ridiculously outdated and needs a refresh to better suit the students it is created for. The Curriculum was published in 2007 - 15 years ago - but the Ministry of Education started drafting it in 2004 - 18 years ago.[32] To put things in perspective, that's 6 political terms, and coincidentally also the number of years it takes to become a functioning adult. I'm certain that the conditions of New Zealand have changed significantly since 2004, including its social environment, only further emphasising the need for an updated curriculum that considers all aspects of a student's life, *especially* their ability to build healthy relationships that minimises the sense of loneliness felt across the country. With acknowledgement that a current refresh is occurring, we need to be mindful that it meets the needs of today's rangatahi. The stated purpose of the Curriculum is to "develop the competencies they need for study, work, and lifelong learning and go on to realise their potential."[33] but in reality, it is the structure that creates the nation's future. The minimal focus the Curriculum has on social skills and values is evident through the lack of implementation of

[32] TKI. 2021. "Developing the Draft / Curriculum Project Archives / Archives / Kia Ora - NZ Curriculum Online." Nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz. 2021. https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Archives/Curriculum-project-archives/Developing-the-draft#:~:text=The%20NZ%20Curriculum%20(2007)%20is.

the Key Competencies 'Relating to Others' and 'Participating and Contributing' across all subjects. Currently, Health and PE are the primary subjects that consistently work towards "enhanc[ing the students'] interactions and relationships with others,"[33]through their curriculum and achievement standards. While they're both compulsory subjects in school, the extent of learning in younger year levels is only minimal. With recent statistics that highlight the decline in literacy and numeracy levels in New Zealand, it is clear that the value of wellbeing is being superseded by the value of basic education. The World Health Organisation outlines the importance of "promot[ing] health and well-being in all subject areas."[34] and urges schools to encourage learning about health and wellbeing in all subjects, rather than just one optional subject that is often labelled *boring* or *useless*. Instead of changing the entire curriculum, I propose adding an additional strand to the already-existing curriculum that exclusively focuses on the social wellbeing of the rangatahi of New Zealand at all year levels.

Aim:

The aim of this proposal is to nourish the social wellbeing of the rangatahi of New Zealand and help them develop the social skills required to build and maintain healthy relationships throughout all stages of life. Through the gathered research, it is clear that there is a need for a bureaucratic action which acknowledges the lack of social ability the youth of New Zealand currently experiences. This additional strand not only fulfils this space, but also addresses the National Education Goals to help the rangatahi "develop the values needed to become full members of New Zealand's society," and "skills needed by New Zealanders to compete successfully in the modern, ever-changing world."[35]

[33] Ministry of Education. 2015. "The New Zealand Curriculum for English-Medium Teaching and Learning in Years 1-13." https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/content/download/1108/11989/file/NZ%20Curriculum%20Web.pdf.

[34] The World Health Organisation. 2021. "Global School Health Initiatives: Achieving Health and Education Outcomes." Www.who.int. 2021. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/global-school-health-initiatives-achieving-health-and-education-outcomes.

[35] Zealand, Education in New. 2021. "The National Education Goals (NEGs)." Education in New Zealand. 2021. https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/legislation/negs/.

Framework for improving Social Wellbeing for all Rangatahi:
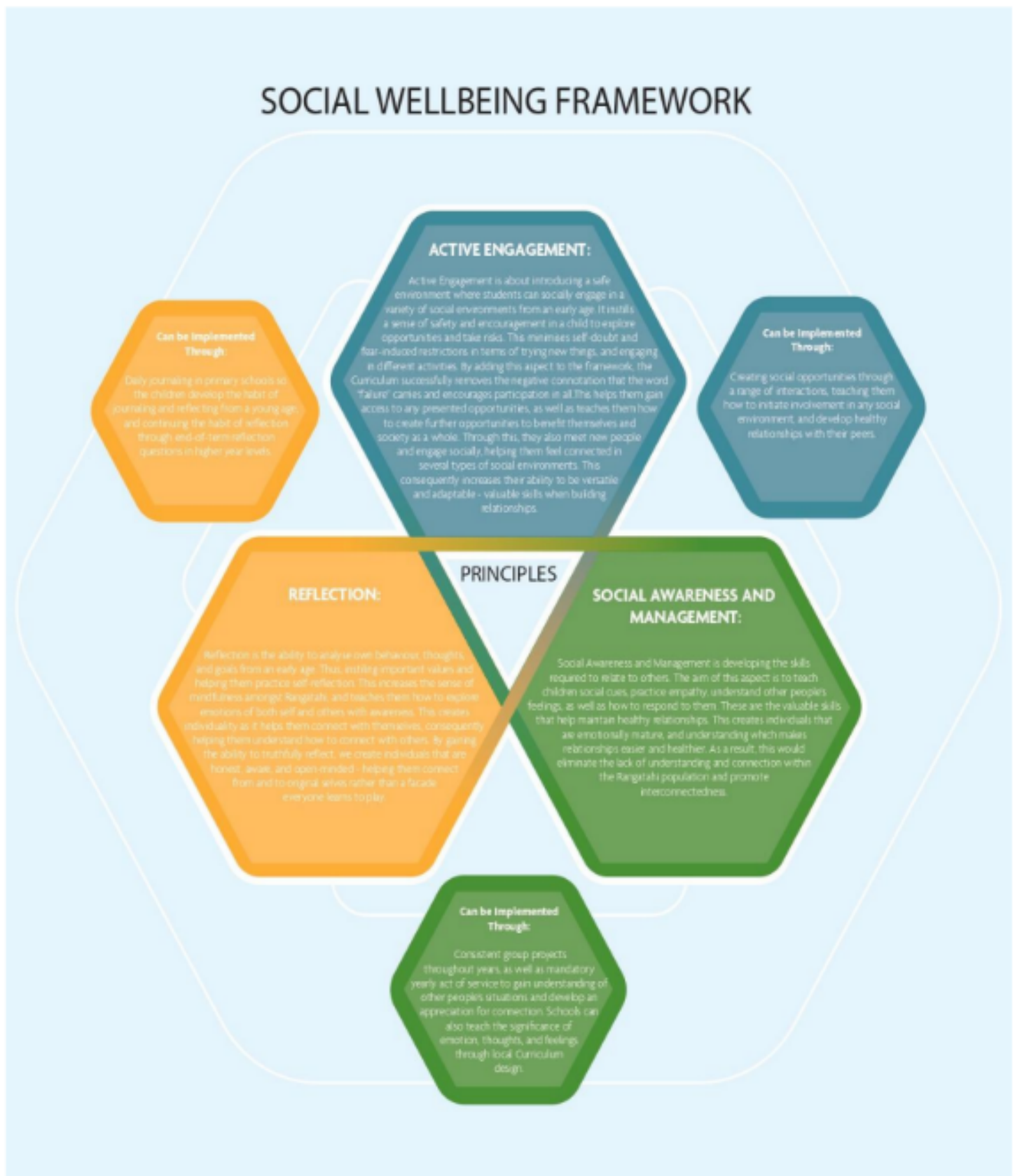
This model was inspired by the 'A New Foundation for Readiness' Model, and the EU ENSET programme.

The implementation of such values in each subject at every year level is applicable and easy. By integrating the values and social skills of active engagement, social awareness and management, and reflection, the Curriculum ensures the capability of rangatahi to stay connected. This helps reduce the feeling of loneliness amongst the rangatahi and enables them to build healthy relationships. By actively engaging they will have more opportunities to meet new people and build connections. This will then allow them to practise their social skills in different social environments, and be able to manage those relationships with emotional maturity and understanding by recognising emotions and how to deal with them. This is also strengthened by the learnt skill of self-reflection which will help them create an internal space in which they're able to understand their own emotions and actions. Their fulfilled mental capacity then allows them to understand other people better. This then leads to them feeling confident in their management of self and relationships, making them more available and open to building new connections. This automatically creates a positive feedback loop in which a sense of positivity and connectedness is spread throughout the rangatahi in New Zealand - ensuring that everyone is equipped with the skills required to have a healthy social wellbeing, consequently minimising the feeling of loneliness. By adding this strand to the Curriculum we do not just solve the problem, we ensure that there is no problem to begin with.

Through the implementation of the Framework, we also promote the hua of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.

CHILDREN and YOUNG PEOPLE are ACCEPTED. RESPECTED and CONNECTED	CHILDREN and YOUNG PEOPLE are LEARNING and DEVELOPING	CHILDREN and YOUNG PEOPLE are HAPPY and HEALTHY
This includes feeling a sense of belonging, living free from racism and discrimination, care for others, having good relationships, and being connected to identity.	This includes education to build knowledge, skills and capabilities, and encouragement to achieve potential and navigate life's transitions.	This includes physical and mental health, spaces and opportunities to play, and healthy environments.
By teaching the social skills necessary to build and manage healthy relationships, the rangatahi collectively experiences a sense of belonging and connection to others and themselves, as well as develops the skill to be mindful of others and their feelings.	The addition of this strand equips the children with knowledge and social skills that help them build relationships as well as manage them, resulting in a society in which healthy relationships are encouraged and supported from an early age.	The qualified Curriculum has the power to create healthy environments which help produce positive social interactions, consequently improving the overall wellbeing - especially social, and mental and emotional wellbeing - of youth in Aotearoa.

Further Considerations

Moving to Aotearoa was undoubtedly a significant cultural change as I went from living in a country where a connection with family and friends was highly valued and maintained through regular face-to-face interactions to a country where it is common for families to not eat dinner together. NZ's delivery company, My Food Bag proves this through the results of their research conducted in 2018 that concludes that 79% of New Zealand children wished "they had more

dinners together as a family."[36] This is not only sad but also expresses a sense of longing for family dinners that is shared amongst the country's rangatahi. As aforementioned, building a strong relationship with our family is important to develop the skill to connect with others, and if the youth of New Zealand feels disconnected, it is urgent that we promote connection within Whanau.

Summary

We've heard the saying, "team of 5 million" for so long, and yet we continuously feel like individuals in a crowd of people who have it all figured out. As William Shakespeare advised, "Nothing comes from nothing," so it's time we do something. The purpose of this report was to evaluate the widespread feeling of loneliness shared amongst the rangatahi of Aotearoa, and provide a strategy to help prevent the epidemic of loneliness. The report reviews an aspect of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy that focuses on the social wellbeing of the rangatahi. It then considers a variety of factors that may contribute to the issue, and recommends an addition to the current NZ Curriculum in order to promote the learning of social skills and values. Although the recommendation is fairly optimistic, it is a much needed starting point because otherwise, the next annual report by the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy will continue to have unavailable data and unchanged statistics.

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[36] My Food Bag. 2018. "Our Customers." My Food Bag. 2018. https://www.myfoodbag.co.nz/sustainability/our-customers.

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Outstanding Scholarship Exemplar 2022

Subject	Health and Physical Education		**Standard**	93501	**Total score**	20

Annotation

This report has been graded at an Outstanding Scholarship level. The report is constructed with a logical development of the candidate's argument and ideas, with effective use of headings to structure the report. The candidate coherently and convincingly interconnects knowledge, ideas, and concepts through a sophisticated examination of loneliness. The Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy is critiqued, as well as the New Zealand Curriculum and how it could be enhanced to support the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.

The report begins by identifying loneliness as an issue on both a personal and societal level and challenges the ability of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy to successfully identify this through their research. Hauora is used to recognise the importance of connection, which is supported through (overseas) research. The candidate draws on several issues and theories, including screen time, teenage culture in Aotearoa New Zealand, and phenomenological perspective which is connected to their own experiences. The application of knowledge is the weakest area of the report and could have been strengthened by using more concepts connected to the Health and Physical Education learning area. The underlying concepts of socioecological perspective, attitudes, and values and hauora are evident, although often implicit. Health promotion is an underlying concept that is neglected in this report.

The candidate has divergent and sophisticated ideas around the concept of loneliness and how it could be addressed. The report consistently challenges and critiques the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy. The candidate's own experiences are woven through the report in an elegant way and are connected to research. The report questions and challenges teenage culture and the New Zealand Curriculum and synthesises a framework that could be added to the curriculum that is focused on social wellbeing. The candidate extrapolates the key themes of their critical evaluation to design the framework and connects it to the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy objectives.

The report has a convincing and compelling argument with clever use of metaphors, if the language is somewhat overstated in places. The arguments are well supported by evidence, but a stronger Aotearoa New Zealand context at times would have been more compelling. The report clearly and precisely identifies a range of different perspectives on a complex topic, and analyses links and interrelationships between a range of factors and issues to come to original and insightful conclusions. These conclusions are extrapolated to suggest strategies for enhancing future wellbeing of youth in Aotearoa New Zealand. The topic is unique, and the candidate demonstrates divergent thinking in a compelling and critical manner.