

The agentic ways children, their families and their community sustain participation in occupations in the context of poverty

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ABSTRACT

There is considerable evidence that children in poverty and their parent/s and communities are agentic in coping with poverty; however, there is limited research addressing how they overcome poverty-related obstacles to participation in everyday activities (occupations) that support their health, wellbeing, and future potential. We employed Lister's framework of 'Getting by', 'Getting (back) at', 'Getting out', and 'Getting organised' to analyse data generated from a study (n = 25) conducted in 2022 with children aged 10–13 years, their families, and community organisations in a city in Aotearoa New Zealand. The study used a qualitative case study approach, incorporating multiple data collection methods, rigorous analysis, cultural guidance, and ethical approval.

Findings revealed that children's agency is situational. Children living in poverty exercised agency to overcome context-specific barriers to participation within the constraints of parental boundaries set for safety, availability of resources, and occupational opportunities, while sustaining aspirations for future participation. Their agency was shaped by values and skills taught by parent/s and extended family, and by involvement in available occupations. Social services such as schools and community organisations supported children's agency, though this support diminished with age. Interpreting children's agency from a transactional perspective highlights its contextual nature, recognising children's dependence on social actors to build occupational capabilities that may lift them out of poverty, even as their personal aspirations and agentic actions remain clear. Despite these efforts, access to occupational opportunities and sustainable, government-backed support for community-led initiatives remains limited.

Introduction

Child poverty is a significant issue in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), and internationally, harming children's health, wellbeing, and future potential (Duncanson et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2021). However, when supported by family, communities, and anti-poverty initiatives, the negative effects of poverty can be minimised, and children can go on to flourish and reach their full potential in life (Mayo et al., 2022; United Nations [UN], 2023). There is considerable research published about how parent/s and communities support children in poverty (Anderson et al., 2022; Ejrnæs et al., 2020; Houkamau, 2016; Lindberg et al., 2018; Park, 2023) and children's agentic responses to poverty (Mayo et al., 2022; Reife et al., 2020; Ridge, 2011; Viñas et al., 2019). However, there is limited research that explores how children, with the support of their families and community, exert agency to overcome poverty-related

obstacles to participation in occupations, and how this supports their health, wellbeing, and future potential (Leadley, 2023; Leadley et al., 2020).

In this context, we define occupation as all the things that people do, alone and together, that occupy their time and give meaning to life, including caring for oneself and others, learning and leisure pursuits, and community activities (Johnson & Anvarizadeh, 2024). While the term occupation is commonly defined as paid work and the equivalent term used in child poverty literature is 'activity' (Bessell, 2022; Mayo et al., 2020), these diverse approaches all align with the World Health Organization (WHO) International Classification of Functional, Disability and Health (ICF) (Popova et al., 2025). Equitable opportunity to participate in diverse childhood occupations is a right for all children (Gladstone et al., 2021; Peters & Galvaan, 2021). Opportunities for participation in occupations can help develop children's capabilities by

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widening their interests and building skills and social networks, thus supporting their wellbeing and transition into adulthood (Popova et al., 2025; Rogers, 2025).

Children's Agentic Responses to Poverty

Childhood poverty is experienced as a major adversity (Mayo et al., 2022) that prompts children to develop deliberate physiological, behavioural, emotional, and cognitive strategies to mitigate stressors (Mayo et al., 2022; Viñas et al., 2019). Stress reduction strategies may also be occupational in nature, such as actions to sustain participation in social occupations with peers despite poverty-related barriers (Leadley, 2023). Agentic coping responses to stressful life circumstances are typically defined as an individual's ability to act in autonomous, purposeful ways (Lister, 2021; Nyman et al., 2014), although consideration of broader societal forces and collectivist worldviews challenge that individualistic perspective (Lister, 2021; Nyman et al., 2014; Varpanen, 2019). A contemporary conceptualisation of childhood emphasises children's capability to exert agency as citizens in society, and holders and defenders of rights (Jerome & Starkey, 2022), but also sees children's agency as shaped by social and cultural factors (Lister, 2021; Varpanen, 2019). Of note, children's agentic coping strategies differ from those of adults, are relationally and situationally dependent (Viñas et al., 2019) and are influenced by systemic and structural factors (Bessell, 2022; Ejrnæs et al., 2020; Lister, 2021).

From a capabilities approach (CA), children's ability to respond to poverty depends on both their functionings and their capabilities. Functionings refer to what a child is able to do and be in their current circumstances, such as being healthy, attending school, or participating in important occupations at home and in the community. Capabilities refer to the opportunities and freedoms children have to develop meaningful skills, pursue valued goals, and build their future wellbeing and potential (Chen & Lin, 2020).

Capabilities are influenced by several factors. This includes adaptive attitude, which refers to how people adjust their expectations and aspirations in response to difficult circumstances such as poverty. Capabilities also depend on access to resources, such as income and material goods, and on conversion factors, or the ability to transform those resources into positive outcomes. Conversion factors include personal characteristics (e.g., age or illness), as well as social, cultural, physical, and institutional conditions (e.g., access to education, healthcare, and community services) (Chen & Lin, 2020; Robeyns & Byskov, 2021).

These ideas are consistent with a transactional perspective, which views children's agency as situational, with their participation in occupations a result of a confluence of dynamic and complex transactions between the child, their occupations, and their environment (Nyman et al., 2014). With respect to children's agency and multidimensional poverty, their capacity to exert agency in relation to constraints on their patterns of participation in occupations is likely shaped not only by their own efforts and coping strategies, but also by the availability of resources and opportunities to participate in occupations, and the support and influence of their family, community, and broader society (Leadley et al., 2020).

To understand the different ways children respond to poverty, this study draws on Lister's (2021) framework of agency. The framework recognises that responses to poverty extend beyond individual coping behaviours and include social, collective, and political actions. It conceptualises agency along two continua: from personal to political action, and from everyday to more strategic forms of action (Lister, 2021; Redmond, 2009). While frameworks conceptualising agency promoted within behavioural and cognitive psychology and resiliency approaches are helpful (Nyman et al., 2014), Lister's framework (2021) was selected to frame children's agency for this study because it contextualises their actions beyond individualised and simplistic positive/negative coping strategies (Mayo et al., 2022; Reife et al., 2020). Additionally, it provided an organisational structure to positively frame the perspectives of

their families and other adults supporting children in their community. The framework is figuratively represented by four quadrants consisting of:

1. 'Getting by': a person's/child's actions that help them cope with poverty on a daily basis.
2. 'Getting (back) at': adapting to their circumstances but may also reflect a sense of powerlessness through forms of anti-social behaviour.
3. 'Getting out': exploring and engaging in ways to improve their life circumstances.
4. 'Getting organised': being socially and politically active in the anti-poverty space (Lister, 2021, p. 129).

In the following section, we apply Lister's framework to structure our discussion of the research-based evidence concerning children's agency in overcoming barriers to participation.

Evidence of Children's Agency in Overcoming Barriers to Participation in Occupations in the Context of Poverty

Evidence shows that children living in poverty adopt 'getting by' strategies to support their families and maintain daily life. For example, children reduce financial demands on their family by skipping meals, saving money, walking instead of using transportation, and seeking help from extended networks to fund items or occupations they value (Chaufan et al., 2015; Ridge, 2011). Getting by includes contributing to family life by helping with chores and taking on caregiver roles. These efforts strengthen family bonds and help parent/s or guardians conserve energy or maintain employment (Redmond, 2009; Ridge, 2011).

Other forms of getting by involve young people taking on part-time work or household responsibilities, while some exclude themselves from occupations that would deplete family resources, reducing or hiding their needs to minimise family stress (Andresen & Meiland, 2019; Mayo et al., 2022). Children and young people in poverty tend to engage more regularly in low-cost sedentary activities like watching TV or using online devices, or finding comfort in occupations that require minimal material resources, such as spending time with family and self-care activities (Ho et al., 2016; Nagata et al., 2022; Quarmby & Dagkas, 2013; Reife et al., 2020). When compared with their wealthier peers, outside the home, children in poverty more often engage in unstructured, peer-led play/recreation and make the most of social interactions when walking to school with friends (Day & Wager, 2010; Veitch et al., 2017). Preliminary evidence indicates these 'getting by' strategies are replicated in Aotearoa New Zealand (Leadley, 2023; Leadley et al., 2020).

Some getting by strategies used by children living in poverty are visible, like caregiving, while others, such as self-exclusion (e.g., from school trips) or participating in sedentary home-based recreations, are more hidden (Ridge, 2011). These actions can also lead to negative outcomes, including stress-related behaviours (Joseph et al., 2020; Mayo et al., 2022). Unsupervised play in unsafe areas exposes these children to bullying or violence, and self-exclusion from school trips and pro-social occupations with peers, that may harm their mental health and wellbeing (Andresen & Meiland, 2019). Furthermore, while their agentic actions support participation despite poverty's constraints, they rarely match the opportunities available to wealthier peers (Andresen & Meiland, 2019; Egan-Birtan, 2012).

Strategies identified as supporting children and young people to 'get out' of poverty encompass 'getting by' efforts that foster independence and enhance their capabilities, such as providing emotional support (e.g., giving parents space to manage stress) or paid work, (Redmond, 2009). Some children do not define themselves as poor (Sarti et al., 2015), and many engage in education or training and connect with social services, aspiring to improve their socioeconomic status and maintain hope, goals, and dreams for the future (e.g., travel or career ambitions) (Egan-Birtan, 2012; Lindberg et al., 2018; Redmond, 2009;

Reife et al., 2020).

'Getting organised' agentic strategies align with broader socio-political engagement, through occupations such as volunteering, and civic participation (Redmond, 2009; Schwartz et al., 2015). Building positive social networks also offers crucial support and resources for navigating poverty (Andresen & Meiland, 2019; Lindberg et al., 2018). However, research suggests that young people experiencing poverty are less likely to engage in civic activities or form strong peer relationships, likely due to socioeconomic barriers (Andresen & Meiland, 2019; Schwartz et al., 2015; Wager et al., 2010).

Finally, 'getting back at' strategies or those reflecting disengagement or resistance include externalising behaviours in occupations such as petty crime, vandalism, substance use, and other anti-social acts (Ameratunga et al., 2019; Lambie et al., 2026; Mayo et al., 2022). In Aotearoa NZ, gang involvement may be difficult to avoid for some youth in poverty, offering both risky consequences (e.g., crime, violence) and a contradictory sense of belonging and access to resources (Egan-Birtan, 2010; Lambie et al., 2026). While such responses can be seen as emerging from powerlessness (Redmond, 2009), they often also lead to further exclusion from pro-social occupational opportunities and diminished wellbeing (Reife et al., 2020; Viñas et al., 2019).

Supporting Children's Agency: Family

Research highlights the vital role of parents and family, especially mothers and grandparents, in supporting children's health, wellbeing, and their agency to participate in daily life (Ejrnæs et al., 2020; Houkamau, 2016; Park, 2023). In terms of 'getting by' strategies, families nurture children through emotional support, life skills education, and positive parenting (Anderson et al., 2022; Leadley et al., 2020; Park, 2023; Reife et al., 2020). They also endeavour to protect children from harm, foster their self-esteem, and provide stable and safe housing amidst the precarious nature of housing tenure experienced by many families in poverty (Anderson et al., 2022; Duncanson et al., 2022; Ridge, 2011).

To cover the costs of their children's occupations, families engage in paid work, utilise budgeting strategies, pool their support, access services (e.g., affordable afterschool programs), resource seek (e.g., find cheap/free household items) and prioritise children's needs (Anderson et al., 2022; Ejrnæs et al., 2020; Hernandez et al., 2023; Lindberg et al., 2018; Ridge, 2011). Families also use imaginative, low-cost solutions, like creative opportunities to participate in free/cheap occupations such as making chores a fun activity, using TV/computers and books for entertainment, borrowing or purchasing cheaper sports equipment, seeking financial support, going to the beach/local park, and visiting extended family (Anderson et al., 2022; Duncanson et al., 2022; Houkamau, 2016; Mayo et al., 2022; Ridge, 2011; van Leeuwen et al., 2022). However, these efforts often come at a personal cost, including parents sacrificing their own needs and facing stigma that can deter help-seeking efforts (Anderson et al., 2022; Lindberg et al., 2018; Mayo et al., 2022).

Examples of families adopting 'getting out' strategies include rejecting poverty labels and teaching cultural values and ethics, such as Māori tikanga¹ to build identity and pride (Houkamau, 2016), providing affirming role modelling and teaching valuable life skills (Leadley et al., 2020), instilling hope, and collective use of resources (Mayo et al., 2022). 'Getting organised' strategies involve parents' participation in and support for their children's engagement with education, volunteering roles, and advocacy to strengthen social capital, antipoverty campaigns, and push for systemic change (Bessell, 2022; Leadley et al., 2020; Mayo et al., 2022). Adults' 'getting back at' poverty strategies include engaging in riots, acts of violence, or subversion of punitive structures of oppression (e.g., unfair beneficiary systems), that, along

with experiencing frustration and injustices, show signs of defiance, strength and resilience in the midst of poverty (Lister, 2021).

Supporting Children's Agency: Community and Governmental Anti-Poverty Strategies

Community-based supports such as extended family, schools, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and local community centres play a vital role in helping children, young people and their families exert agency and cope with poverty, such as through fostering positive social capital and cohesion (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2011, 2020). While these non-economic resources promote inclusion, identity, and equity, they are often less accessible in disadvantaged areas (Di Monaco et al., 2020; Hyde & Eyrich-Garg, 2024). Additionally, while national policies on income and housing are essential (Axford & Berry, 2023), the wellbeing of children living in poverty can be significantly enhanced by the locally driven, educational, after-school, social and recreational activities that support children's efforts to get by, get out and get organised (Choi et al., 2024; Forbes & Kerr, 2023; Harms & Garrett-Ruffin, 2023; Lynch et al., 2020). To maximise those outcomes, children, young people, their families, and their communities must be involved in designing anti-poverty solutions (Bessell, 2022; Schweiger, 2019).

In summary, there is substantial evidence that children in poverty, with the support of their families and communities, are agentic. However, less is known about how children use agency to navigate poverty from an occupational perspective. In particular, limited research has examined how poverty shapes children's patterns of occupation—including their habits, routines, roles, and family rituals—and how these patterns influence their current wellbeing and future educational, vocational, and health outcomes. This study addresses this knowledge gap, reporting selected findings of a study conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand. The research question was: *What are the ways in which poverty shapes tamariki | children's patterns of participation in occupations, their wellbeing, and potential?*

Methods

The study used qualitative case study methodology (CSM) based on Stake's (1995, 2006) approach, focusing on two high-deprivation neighbourhoods in Aotearoa New Zealand (2021–2022), with each neighbourhood considered a "case". Across the two cases, fictitiously named Fernlee and Riverfield to protect participant anonymity, the study involved 25 participants: 9 children (aged 10–13 years), 5 parent/s, plus 5 adults and 6 neighbourhood community workers who supported the children's participation in occupation. While the number of cases, and thus the number of participants, was constrained by the scope of this doctoral study, the purposive sampling strategy and extensive data gathered supported the aim of the CSM approach to gain a depth of understanding of the cases studied.

Data were collected in two stages by (SL) using established qualitative CSM methods. In the first stage, a child-adapted focus group (Adler et al., 2019) was conducted in each of the two neighbourhoods (n = 9), alongside semi-structured interviews with adults working with children and families experiencing poverty in those sites (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). In the second stage, four children drawn from the focus groups and across both cases (Mateo, Miriama, Jarad, and Ofa; pseudonyms) participated in semi-structured interviews that used less formal approaches and age-appropriate language (Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019). Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with their parent/s and other adults who supported their occupations. Additional data were gathered using child-focused techniques, including photo-elicitation, where each of the four children was provided with a disposable camera and asked to photograph and, later, discuss their meaningful occupations during the interview (Bunting, 2016). Each child, assisted by a parent, also used a time-use diary to create a seven-

¹ Terms in te reo Māori, the indigenous language of Aotearoa, are defined in the glossary.

day record of when, where, and with whom they participated in occupations (Orban et al., 2012). These children also marked on a large-scale map of the city the location, frequency, and types of transport used to get to occupations that took place outside their home (Laliberte Rudman & Huot, 2013). Participant observation was also undertaken at agreed times in the family's home and a community setting (Stake, 2010).

Concurrently, document review was conducted, examining relevant websites and statistical data related to the cases and research topic (Stake, 1995, 2010). This CSM approach of using multiple data collection methods enabled a diverse, enriched, and rigorous approach to understanding participants' views about the research topic. Data analysis involved direct interpretation, or describing and assigning meaning to specific data, and categorical aggregation, consisting of assigning categories and ascribing meaning to data (Stake, 1995, 2006). The initial analysis was guided by two theoretical frameworks, occupational science and life course theory.

Rigour was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and reflexive practices (Leadley et al., 2024; Stake, 1995). Ethical protocols included informed consent, protecting the participants' identities, child-friendly methods such as fun, creative activities for data gathering (e.g., photo-elicitation), use of child-friendly language, and adherence to cultural principles required to conduct a study in Aotearoa New Zealand (Graham et al., 2015; National Ethics Advisory Committee [NEAC], 2019). Ethical approval was granted by Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (Approval No. 20/210). For a more detailed explanation of the research design, refer to (Leadley, 2023; Leadley et al., 2026). As this study was conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), and to honour the nation's bilingual roots, te reo Māori (the language of the Indigenous Māori people) is used for key terms in the findings section. As the English and Māori concepts are not equivalent, te reo Māori terms are defined in the glossary.

For this article, the findings of the initial study were re-conceptualised through the lens of Lister's (2021) framework. To achieve that, the findings derived from child-, whānau-, and community-related data were mapped onto one of the four quadrants of Lister's (2021) framework according to the best fit between the data and the defining characteristics of each quadrant. For example, the finding that the children aspired to achieve positive educational and employment outcomes in life was categorised as aligned with *getting out strategies* of exploring and engaging in ways to improve their life circumstances. While some findings could be categorised into more than one quadrant in Lister's framework, alignment of findings was made on the basis of the closest fit to the meaning of each quadrant.

Findings

The findings reported in this paper highlight forms of agency, based on Lister's (2021) framework, from an occupational perspective, of the tamariki | children and their whānau | families and community; that is, the occupation-based strategies the tamariki | children used to adapt to and cope with poverty's impacts on their patterns of participation, and sustain engagement in valued occupations despite their situation. Across the two cases, it was clear that these tamariki | children had considerable strengths, skills and strategies that helped them cope with and exert agency over their circumstances. While not all of Lister's (2021) forms of agency were evident for all participants, they were represented across the two cases. The majority of strategies the tamariki | children employed involved occupations related to 'getting by' or coping with impoverished circumstances, with minimal evidence of 'getting back at' approaches across the data set. In reporting the findings, the strategies of the tamariki | children, their whānau | families and those working to support them in their local community are integrated together, starting with 'getting out' and 'getting organised', followed by 'getting by', and finally 'getting back at'. To honour the agency and aspirational actions of the tamariki and their whānau, Lister's (2021) strategies are presented in order from the more strategic (getting out) to the everyday

forms (getting by) of agency. Pseudonyms are used to identify participants.

Occupational 'Getting Out' and 'Getting Organised' Forms of Agency. For all the tamariki | children, a 'getting out' strategy of improving their life circumstances centred on their hopes and dreams for a bright future, with their active engagement at school viewed as particularly important to achieving that outcome. Additionally, whānau | families and community members expressed pride in their neighbourhoods and shared aspirations for a better future for their tamariki | children.

"My goal is to ... "be a plumber" ... "own a business ... make my family proud", "be a social worker", "be a professional basketball player"... "rugby player"... "having a job of... a Youtuber" ... "learning" ... [and] "graduate [from] school and get a job." (Tamariki | children in the Fernlee & Riverfield Focus groups.)

The importance of education, both culturally and as a pathway out of poverty, was captured in a photo chosen by Ofa, who is Tongan and aged 12 years, showing him proudly dressed in his school uniform and ready for 'apiako (Tongan for school) (Fig. 1).

Productive occupations such as household chores and caregiving roles can also be seen as forms of 'getting out', or ways tamariki | children improve their life circumstances by engaging in informal, skill-based learning with their whānau | family. Gaining practical knowledge in areas like cooking, gardening, and household maintenance; organisational skills for study or paid work; and cultural traditions such as *whakapapa* (genealogy), supports their transition into adulthood and future capacities as homemakers, parents, employees, and participants in their culture. A photo taken by Monū (Ofa's mother) of him dancing at his local Tongan church, which also provides a space for homework support (called the Home Centre) and cultural learning, captures how this meaningful occupation shapes his identity, strengthens cultural and community ties, and builds his future potential (Fig. 2). *"That's me doing a dance ... about a Bible story ... for the last day of Home Centre ... with my friends and cousins"* [Ofa's photo-elicitation interview].

For parents, 'getting out' strategies often involved instilling cultural values like *manaakitanga* (care), teaching *whakapapa* (genealogy), and modelling pro-social behaviours. Additional learning and emotional support came from older siblings, or a *tuakana-teina* dynamic such as mentoring, or was gained from time spent with whānau | extended family (e.g., uncle, aunty, grandparents), school, and community groups.



Fig. 1. Ofa Outside his Fale (Home) in his School Uniform, Ready for 'Apiako | School. Note: Photograph taken by Ofa's father.



Fig. 2. Ofa Performing a Bible Story Dance, in Tongan Traditional Clothing, at his Church. Note: Photograph taken by Monū, Ofa's mother.

I'll ... teach them how to put the washing on ... folding clothes ... mowing the lawn ... My father, [Mateo's koroua or grandfather] tries to teach Mateo Māori and whakapapa ... Mateo's got a good ear for that sort of stuff." [Maria's interview—Mateo's mother]

Some single parents chose to remain at home due to health or caregiving needs, enabling increased time and emotional support for their tamariki | children despite the increased financial hardship this incurred. Others pursued work, study, or were planning business ventures to improve their whānau | family's future, although they faced challenges such as working for low wages, shift work, high living costs, and the strain of balancing multiple roles.

We have many plans ... aim for ... better life ... I have a plan. I try for my own ... small business. [Malohi's interview—Ofa's father]

The tamariki | children across the two case studies demonstrated forms of 'getting organised' agency, shown in their volitional intent (i.e., values, interests, personal causation) (Lee & Kielhofner, 2024) to support others such as their peers, family, and community, and in small ways to help effect change to counter poverty's influence and contribute to the collective wellbeing of their communities. This occurred through their participation in occupations that were caring and generous in nature, such as supporting friends at school: "I help a lot of people at my school" (Miriam's interview), or through classroom helper roles: "I clean up the class at the end of the day" (Jarad's interview), and "I take out the rubbish ... do the cleaning and stuff ... PE gear ... at school" (Mateo's interview). Getting organised was also apparent in participation in volunteer roles in their communities; "I'm in my own environment agent group ... planting plants [in] the gully" (Ofa's interview), and "I'm a junior helper ... at the [local] Community Centre" (Mateo's interview).

Additional 'getting out' and 'getting organised' strategies at the whānau | family and community levels included whānau | family's involvement in volunteer activities in their community, access to free education for their tamariki | children, and a range of free/low-cost services often delivered through the local community centre or churches. For example, after-school and holiday programmes, or support for at-risk rangatahi | youth, and government-funded initiatives like state housing and subsidies for after-school programmes.

I just think this community centre has ... lots of things here ... cheap after-school care ... we've got a youth programme ... mentoring ... our young people ... we allow young people to come for free. Our holiday programmes are cheap. (Werimu's interview—Fernlee youth worker)

However, these neighbourhoods experienced limited resources and inequitable and precarious government funding. For example, many whānau | family lacked transport options to get their tamariki | children to school, and schools lacked funding for truancy, counselling, and health services, which experts have argued should be integrated into schools (Haig, 2014). Transitioning from primary to intermediate/high schools that had lower levels of government funding also meant reduced support services, which shifted financial burdens onto whānau | family who could least afford it (Ministry of Education [Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga], 2022). Despite these constraints, organisations within these two communities found pragmatic solutions to support participation in occupations for tamariki | children that supported their education, which, along with employment, were seen as a key pathway out of poverty.

Like my van run ... yeah totally voluntary ... the van, it provides transport for kids that can't get to school on time every day ... [where] families ... don't have transport ... [But] once they get to intermediate ... when kids leave primary school, lots of things in their little lives seem to stop. (Sue's interview—volunteer, Riverfield Community Centre)

Extracurricular programmes were also valued for supporting tamariki | children's occupational development and identity, but funding was often short-term, age-restricted, and tied to parental employment, excluding some whānau | families.

The holiday programme used to be funded [with] a ... grant up front ... No one had to apply for a subsidy ... 180 kids ... being kept busy during the school holidays ... [now the] subsidy ... [is] targeted at parents who are working or in full-time study. So [if] your parents are ... on a benefit ... they won't be entitled ... the free-range kids ... during the holidays ... They'll just ... roam around. (Trevor's interview—Fernlee Community Centre manager)

Occupational 'Getting by' Forms of Agency. The tamariki | children spent the majority of their waking time (i.e., 20% of their week) in low-cost or free sedentary activities. This occupational pattern was an agentic response to 'get by' in the context of very limited occupational choices outside of school hours. The paucity of occupational opportunities was underscored by Miriam's reports of her typical weekend: "We don't do nothing, we just sleep ... grab my Chromebook ... watch a movie" (interview). These attempts at 'getting by' were also highlighted by adults working in the community to support the tamariki | children's participation: "There's not much ... not enough things [to do in] ... the neighbourhood ... [like] ... clubs or groups ... arts and crafts ... things [that are] free ... even just like low cost" (Georgia's interview—Fernlee after-school worker). The leisure-based occupations the tamariki | children typically engaged in after school, either alone or with siblings and their parent/s, included watching TV, playing on computer devices or cell phones, drawing, playing board games, reading, or resting in their bedrooms. Jarad's account in his interview illustrates what was occurring for most tamariki | children. "Yeah sleeping ... just chilling on my bed or watching TV ... texting with my friends ... or playing [online] games".

While this range of leisure occupations was largely limited to the home, and sedentary, they were seen as important to the tamariki | children. Resting and time alone in their bedrooms was relaxing and restorative. Games with siblings and whānau | family members were fun and increased time spent together in activities as a whānau | family: "Playing games together" ... "playing with whānau at home" ... "Family time, at home" (Tamariki | children in Fernlee and Riverfield focus groups). Mateo's photo (Fig. 3) and description of how he spends time playing with his soft toys highlight one of the beneficial and creative ways the tamariki | children occupied their time in their home. "These are all my stuffed animals ... we just play around with them" (Mateo's photo-elicitation interview).

Online and phone-based (i.e., text messaging or social media) occupations were particularly important and held meaning for the tamariki | children, as these were not only fun and relaxing, but often



Fig. 3. Mateo's Stuffed Toys, Part of the Important Ways he Engages in Restorative (Restful) Activities in his Home. Note. Photograph taken by Mateo.

incorporated social contact with siblings or peers. This is highlighted in Jarad and Mateo's online and gaming occupations (Fig. 4), and as reported by them in their photo-elicitation interviews. "I like watching ... YouTube ... playing on the PC ... Roadblocks" (Jarad); and "My cousin ... playing the game ... having a good time, goofing around" (Mateo).

On average across the two focus groups, tamariki | children's participation in physically active activities, outside of school, was substantially less than their participation in sedentary occupations (5–6% versus 20% of their week). However, they were creative in finding solutions to sustain physical activity where possible, such as playing active and creative games at home or in their backyard with siblings and family (Fig. 5), walking to the shops, riding a bike or scooter, playing at the local park (with parental supervision), and in some cases through limited participation in sports groups that were supported by extended family | whānau or their school. Their attempts to participate in physical activities, despite the limitation's poverty imposed, were captured in the tamariki | children's interviews:

Sometimes ... we bike ride to my cousins ... [and] I played ... for [Riverfield East] Rugby Club. [Ofa's interview]

We like playing basketball ... down by the park ... sometimes we go to the shop ... [or] we take the dog for a walk. [Miriam's interview]

While participation in out-of-school social occupations with peers was constrained by poverty (i.e., restricted income/resources and safety risks in their neighbourhoods), the tamariki | children were motivated to, and exercised their agency in, finding solutions. For example, they maximised their time with peers at school: "Seeing my best friends at school every day" ... "playing with friends" (Tamariki | children in Fernlee and Riverfield focus groups). In addition to those social interactions that occurred during online activities, children also found creative and incidental means of 'hanging out' with their peers, such as meeting up in spaces outside the school and when walking to and from school.

I just head to school ... I wait for my friends ... When my friends come ... we play and when I come back [after school] ... at the community centre

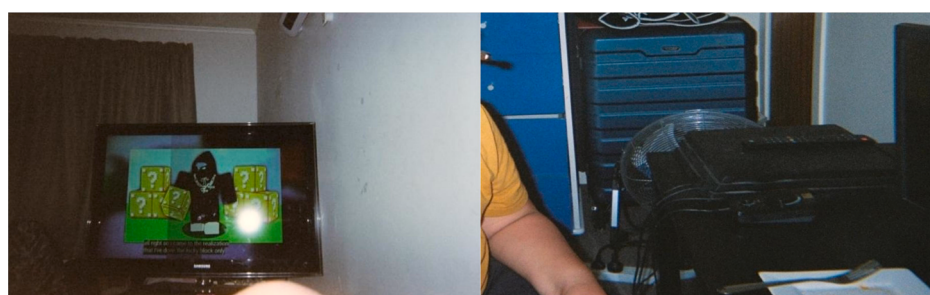


Fig. 4. The Important Occupation of Online Activities. Note. Photograph on left taken by Jarad; photograph on the right taken by Mateo.

... I play with my friend ... when she's going, I'm coming home." [Miriam's interview]

When school finishes, I just hang around at my school ... There's a car-park and that's usually where me and my friends play handball ... they stay there until the bus comes ... and when they go, I just walk home. [Jarad's interview]

As part of their 'getting by' strategies, tamariki | children took active steps to protect themselves, their siblings, and sometimes their peers from harm. These steps included following parental guidance to avoid unsafe areas in their neighbourhood, steering clear of antisocial behaviour, and at times, discouraging peers from engaging in 'risky' occupations. Miriam, for example, exercised autonomy and used specific strategies to reduce the risk of bullying and violence at school.

[At the skatepark] ... heaps of mischief people ... try to smash the windows and I'm like 'Don't smash the windows' ... There's this girl, she bullies everyone at school. She gave my friend a hiding ... she hasn't been coming to school ... It only happens because they do some stuff that they don't like ... That's why my friend got a hiding. So, I just mind my own business. [Miriam's interview]

All of the tamariki | children in this study also engaged in 'getting by' strategies by supporting their parent/s at home, both emotionally and through productive occupations such as household chores.

Clean my room since I have a messy room ... dishes ... do the lawn for mum ... this hedge along the fence, like [Keanu, my older brother] usually snips it and stuff ... and then my job is to just sweep it up, pick it up, put it in the compost bin. [Mateo's interview]

Two tamariki | children were active in choosing to engage in care-giving roles and household responsibilities, such as getting younger siblings ready for school or preparing meals. For example, Jarad (11 years) helped his mother with their morning routine by getting his two younger siblings ready for school, and Ofa (12 years) regularly woke his siblings, and organised their uniforms and lunches, as I observed during the morning visit to Ofa's home.

I visited Ofa's home around 7:30am. Ofa ... was busy making school lunches for his younger siblings ... Then Ofa ducked away to wake his brothers and sisters with instructions like, "time to get up now" and "your uniform is on the chair" ... He was already in his school uniform. He said to me when I asked, "I have been up since 5:30am and had my breakfast and then started to get the lunches ready".

While both boys saw their contributions as essential to their whānau | family's wellbeing, their parent/s expressed concern about the burden placed on them. Ofa's father, Malohi, reflected: "I think it's respectful, but I think ... Maybe it's too much for [Ofa]". The actions of the tamariki | children also reflected cultural values for the whānau | families, such as Māori concepts of *manaakitanga* (kindness and helping at home) and *whanaungatanga* (maintaining strong family bonds) and were shaped by whānau | family's circumstances, such as shift work and large households.

'Getting by' strategies' employed by whānau | families included

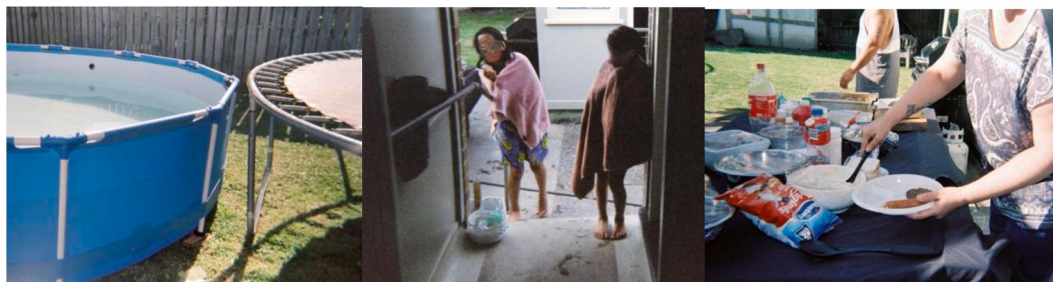


Fig. 5. Fun Outdoor Activities at Jarad's Home during a Summer Weekend. Note. Photographs taken by Jarad and Tui. "Playing on the tramp with my sisters ... my cousins ... and chilling out with my family".

creating a safe, loving home, meeting basic needs, fostering *whanaungatanga*, and practicing *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship) through safety measures for their tamariki | children, like curfews, avoiding risky areas, and provision of transport.

Respect one another ... Manaakitanga [kindness] ... Got to be love ... and patience ... listen to your kids ... the important thing is to have fun and enjoy what you're doing ... [In this neighbourhood] it's not ... a good idea sending the kids to the skate park ... It's pretty bad down there ... the vandalism and stuff ... that goes on there. (Maria's interview—Mateo's mother).

Whānau | families also budgeted carefully, shopped strategically, avoided food waste, and in one instance grew kai/food (e.g., vegetables, fruit, or raised chickens). They supported their tamariki | children's participation in low-cost, local activities and, in some cases, used after-school or holiday programmes to enable work or study, that also helped to enrich their tamariki | children's lives.

Food is pricey so you end up with, hardly any gas [petrol] and hardly any food ... And then [rent] oh man! ... So that's why I do the [food bank] ... [chickens] they give me eggs ... it definitely helps out in the pocket and the cupboard ... We just stick to the free stuff for now ... we got [re-purposed] scooters, bikes and ... she's got her skate friends [at the skatepark] ... we go to ... [the local free] basketball courts ... try and budget ... try and make it as awesome for them as well. (Hemi's interview—Miriam's father)

Occupational 'Getting Back At' Forms of Agency. There were minimal 'getting back at' activities (e.g., antisocial actions), which may reflect reluctance by the participants to divulge antisocial behaviours and the limited number of participants in the study. Only two tamariki | children reported encounters with antisocial activity when hanging out after school, including "climb[ing] on the roof [of buildings]", or watching peers 'tag' or graffiti public spaces. While some of Mateo's peers engaged in tagging, he chose to avoid this activity, demonstrating his courage and awareness of right and wrong.

Well after school ... I walk to the dairy, buy me maybe a drink or lollies and then I'll walk down the tunnels ... [to the] underpass ... and then we hang out there. We play some songs, or some of my friends do like tag the walls on the inside [when they do that] ... I usually just sit there and listen to music. (Mateo's interview)

Discussion

Findings from this study evidenced how tamariki | children and their whānau | family in two neighbourhoods in a large city in Aotearoa NZ actively engaged in agentic strategies that enabled them to adapt to and sustain, where possible, their participation in meaningful occupations, and that their responses needed to be interpreted in relation to the effects of poverty. This study categorised existing research and current findings using Lister's (2021) agency framework. This novel approach found that agentic actions and the occupational perspective of the

current study were readily aligned. This alignment suggests that children's agency can be understood as a transactional process shaped by relational dynamics with whānau | family, community, the experience of poverty, and broader societal influences such as policy and funding. Together, these insights offer a holistic understanding of how children make the best of their circumstances and contribute to those around them, despite the barriers poverty imposes on them.

While this study was not conducted by, or based on Māori Indigenous epistemology or methodology, the findings were informed in consultation with a Māori advisor, enabling alignment with a Māori worldview, such as a holistic view of participation and wellbeing, and a more communal perspective of children's agency grounded in their extended family | whānau (Houkamau, 2016). An Indigenous perspective provided an alternative cultural lens for the analysis, helping to mitigate potential researcher bias and enabling interpretations that resonated more closely with a Māori worldview. Despite the limitations of Lister's (2021) framework, particularly in recognising how far tamariki | children and their whānau | families can exercise agency in the context of poverty, our analysis using the framework showed how policy and funding constraints restricted children's occupational opportunities, which may contribute to poorer wellbeing and reduced future potential.

Many of the strategies employed by the tamariki | children matched what has been previously published (Mayo et al., 2022; Redmond, 2009; Ridge, 2011). However, data from this study captured tamariki | children-led agency across a range of occupations both in the home and the community. For example, engaging in restorative, free or creative home-based activities, and drawing on online and incidental social interactions. Sibling support and role modelling were often reciprocal and represented a distinctive finding. We interpret this reciprocity as consistent with the Māori concept of *tuakana-teina*.

A range of studies have highlighted the important ways parent/s support their tamariki | children despite poverty, such as by providing a caring approach, budgeting, resource seeking, and prioritising their children's needs (Anderson et al., 2022; Ejrnæs et al., 2020; van Leeuwen et al., 2022). However, the findings in this study demonstrated that parent/s used a diverse range of creative strategies to support their tamariki | children's participation in occupations. For example, supporting the learning of cultural values and knowledge, or facilitating access to free play and hobbies through resourceful use of available materials and community options.

In terms of community and governmental supports for tamariki | children, findings revealed that most strategies in this study mirror what is evidenced in the literature as effective in mitigating the impacts of poverty for children, such as involvement in education, support for families (e.g., financially, housing) (Axford & Berry, 2023; Lynch et al., 2020), and through local, community driven actions or interventions such as out of school tamariki | children's programmes (Forbes & Kerr, 2023).

However, the study identified several community-driven interventions, such as free school transport, cultural and homework clubs, and afterschool or holiday programmes. When viewed through Lister's (2021) framework, these initiatives can be interpreted as creating

valuable occupational opportunities for tamariki | children. This finding also highlighted structural constraints, including the lack of sustainable and equitable funding for many initiatives that support tamariki | children's participation in occupations, both across their school years and in out-of-school contexts. The tension between structural constraints and children's agency, alongside the efforts of families and communities to mitigate the impacts of poverty, is evident in the lack of sustained government funding for community-led solutions, such as equitable after-school programmes, holiday programmes, and access to sporting opportunities for children. These findings suggest that adequate and ongoing investment in these areas could enhance children's participation in occupations within their communities.

Despite these unfair and challenging poverty driven circumstances, the findings provide evidence of the agentic strategies employed by the tamariki | children and their whānau | family, with community organisations providing pragmatic solutions that appeared to help offset some of the constraints of poverty on the tamariki | children's patterns of participation in occupations, and to moderate the negative effects that poverty poses to their development, health, wellbeing and future potential. Based on a transactional and occupational perspective (Rosenberg & Johansson, 2013), children's ability to exert agency to overcome poverty-related barriers to participation in occupations is contextual. It is affected by multiple influences, including their own future aspirations, the quality of the relational involvement of their parent/s, siblings, wider whānau | family, and the resourcing and support of their community, in the context of political will, governmental policy and action, and resource constraints.

Whilst the findings showed that tamariki | children were agentic in maximising their participation in occupations, and their whānau | family and community engaged in supportive strategies, poverty remained a negative influence in their lives, creating inequitable opportunities and constrained choices for participation in childhood occupations (Peters & Galvaan, 2021). For example, constraints on whānau | family time, social activity with peers, free play, leisure, or full engagement in school. These constraints can be understood as limiting children's opportunities to participate fully in occupations that are recognised as important for childhood development and wellbeing (United Nations [UN] General Assembly, 1989). From a capabilities perspective, such restrictions may limit the development of capabilities, diminish their wellbeing and future potential for participation in valued occupations. Constraints in children's exposure to occupations and the dynamic transactions between child, occupation and environment have been identified as limiting children's occupational development (Womack & Bagatell, 2024). Thus, to find effective solutions to the problem, these findings underscore the need for tamariki | children, rangatahi | youth, whānau | family, and community-led approaches, along with a public health and transdisciplinary approaches, for solutions to child poverty that can ensure every child's right to full participation in occupations that lay a foundation for their health and future (Bintley & George, 2023; Lysack et al., 2019; Mayo et al., 2022).

This study provides new insights into children's agentic responses to poverty. Viewed through Lister's framework, the data generates a coherent account of the agentic actions of pre-teen children growing up in poverty, showing that rather than merely 'getting by', they actively make use of the occupational opportunities available to them. This includes developing pro-social roles and responsibilities within their families and communities that support their health and wellbeing. Children's talents, interests, and capabilities—those that may enable them to 'get out' of poverty and reach their potential—are evident in their future aspirations and, to some extent, in 'getting organised' actions such as supporting peers or engaging in school or civic activities.

There was little evidence of agency directed towards 'getting back at' society; however, the well-documented problems of gang affiliation, substance use, and crime in impoverished neighbourhoods have been identified in previous research as risks for young people experiencing poverty, suggesting these may become relevant challenges as some

children move into adolescence. Importantly, using Lister's framework as an organising structure highlighted the interlocking transactions between children, families, and communities that support children's developing patterns of occupation and engagement in culturally valued activities that can help buffer against the constraints of poverty. Nonetheless, persistent inequities across health and other social indicators suggest that personal agency alone cannot compensate for the occupational opportunities lost through poverty.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the initial study include that only two case studies were conducted with a relatively small participant group, and based on a NZ context only, thus limiting transferability of the findings and the ability to generalise the findings statistically or develop robust theoretical frameworks. However, the findings of the analysis presented in this paper resonate with published research from comparable Western countries and offer unique insights into the contextualised and transactional nature of the agentic actions of children growing up in relative material poverty. As such, the findings are transferable to similar contexts and contribute valuable perspectives to inform poverty policy.

The authors' backgrounds as privileged, white academics influenced the findings. However, community and cultural consultation, including throughout the study from organisations located in the case studies that work with whānau | families in poverty, and from Māori and Pasifika cultural advisors, plus the lead author's volunteer work in such communities, is seen as helping to mitigate this influence. Nonetheless, the study offers valuable insights into how tamariki | children, their whānau | family, and communities navigate poverty in efforts to sustain meaningful occupational participation that supports their wellbeing and future potential. These findings contribute to the child poverty discourse in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond, offering practical guidance for more effective, supportive policy and strategy.

Summary

This study highlights the diverse, occupation-based ways tamariki | children exercise agency, alongside the relational influences and efforts of their whānau | family and communities, to buffer the impacts of poverty on their patterns of participation and wellbeing. These actions may help moderate poverty-related stress and resource limitations, which are known to negatively affect development, health, wellbeing, and long-term outcomes of children growing up in poverty. However, access to occupational opportunities and sustainable, government-backed support for community-led initiatives remains limited. To enable tamariki | children to fully participate in enriching occupations, child poverty policy and public health strategies, at the national, regional and community levels, should target expanding access to diverse occupations to expand their skills, knowledge and social networks, or their capabilities.

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Author's contribution

All authors have contributed equally to the writing of this article.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

Due to ethical restrictions on sharing data and due to the sensitive nature of the data, de-identified individual participant data that underlie the results are not available.

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Glossary

- Apiako*: is Tongan for school.
- Kaitiakitanga*: is a Māori concept meaning the stewardship, guardianship, care, and conservation of things in life, including in one's immediate and wider environment (Moorfield, n.d.).
- Koroua or koro*: means grandfather in Māori (Moorfield, n.d.).
- Manaakitanga*: is a Māori concept that relates to showing respect, kindness, and hospitality (Moorfield, 2024).
- Tamariki*: is the te reo Māori word for children, as well as young, or youthful (Moorfield, 2024).
- Tikanga*: is a Māori term for correct values, ethics and morals (Moorfield, n.d.).
- Tuakana-teina*: is a Māori concept meaning a mentor, (tuakana), typically an older sibling or peer, who provides guidance or support for a young sibling/peer (teina), helping with their education/learning of skills and values for life, and where this kindness and learning can be reciprocated by the teina (Moorfield, n.d.).
- Rangatahi*: is the Māori term meaning youth, young people, adolescents (Moorfield, 2024).
- Whakapapa*: is the Māori term for one's genealogy or family line of descent (Moorfield, n.d.).
- Whanaungatanga*: is a Māori concept that means a process of getting to know someone and forming a connection or a relationship (Moorfield, 2024).
- Whānau*: is a Māori term meaning family or extended family (Moorfield, 2024).
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