

# The community fence project: A symbolic approach to healing a cultural wound on a housing estate in South Auckland

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## Abstract

This article discusses a community-based art therapy project that took place on a public housing estate in New Zealand. The project involved inviting local residents to design a paling for a community fence, which symbolised either themselves or their unique cultural identity.

The project was built on human rights principles and informed by Freire's pedagogy of empowerment through participation. Its intention was to heal a 'cultural wound' that would otherwise keep marginalised communities trapped in cycles of poverty, resulting in negative impacts on their health and well-being. Restoring a sense of cultural identity and pride is acknowledged as being a significant contributor to the health and well-being of the Maori and Pacific Island peoples, who were key participants in this project. The community fence embodies the diverse personal and cultural identities of the participating residents and works as an expression of individual and community pride.

## Keywords

Public art, Maori, Pacific Islanders, housing estates, cultural identity, New Zealand

The arts touch people on a personal, emotional level and have the power to rebuild the fabric of our community where it has been torn apart by years of poverty and struggle. The arts can construct bridges across barriers of class, race, gender and age. The arts can interpret and celebrate the past, present and future of a community to replace despair and apathy with hope and creation (Lipka & McDaniel, 2001, p.7).

## Introduction

The use of art as a tool for social and personal change within community settings is a well-established component of the art therapy theory and practice (Gersie, 1995; Golub, 2005; Hocoy, 2005; Kapitan, 2009; Kaplan, 2007; Malchiodi, 2007). Inherent in this work is an understanding that the personal is political and that the intention of the work created

is linked to human rights principles (Gray & Young, 2011a; Gray & Young, 2011b; Vellet, 2012). As Vellet (2012) suggests, such work is born out of a desire to heal a cultural wound, and art therapists who engage in this work do so because they recognise that clients are part of larger systems that wound and re-wound, especially where social disparities exist (Junge, 1993).

Whilst some may contend that this kind of art work sits more comfortably in the community cultural development camp rather than as part of the arts therapy spectrum, the author believes otherwise. Rather it is like the central intersection of a venn diagram; the work interweaves community development, human rights, art and therapy, which collectively leads to healthier ways of living both individually and communally. The work builds on what McNiff refers to as the practice of "soul making" (McNiff, 1995, p.183), a