



**"I am a library, quiet but filled
with knowledge - it's dumb
[that I'm not asked]."**

(Student in alternative education unit, Māori)

Education matters to me: Key insights

**A starting point for the Statement of
National Education and Learning Priorities**

Listen to the voices of children and young people

Please respect the voices of the children and young people that have contributed to this report. To reference this report, please include the full title: *Education matters to me: Key insights*, and a link to the online version at www.occ.org.nz

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About the New Zealand School Trustees Association

The New Zealand School Trustees Association (NZSTA) is an independent, non-partisan membership association representing school boards of trustees throughout New Zealand. NZSTA works closely with the government of the day to ensure that all boards of trustees are aware of their legal and ethical responsibilities as governors of their school.

NZSTA's mission is to *Lead and Strengthen School Governance in New Zealand*. We will know we have succeeded in this mission when *all schools are effectively governed by a board of trustees whose primary focus is every student achieving their highest possible educational potential*.

NZSTA has two complementary areas of activity. Our membership activities provide leadership, representation and advocacy for NZSTA member boards. Our service delivery activities, delivered under contract to the Ministry of Education, provide practical support and advice to all boards of trustees to inform and improve governance and employment practice.

Email: feedback@nzsta.org.nz

www.nzsta.org.nz

About the Office of the Children's Commissioner

The 1.12 million children and young people under 18 make up 23% of New Zealand. The Children's Commissioner, Judge Andrew Becroft and his office advocate for their interests, ensure their rights are upheld, and help them have a say on matters that affect them. All our work aligns with our vision to make New Zealand a place where all children thrive.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner is an Independent Crown entity.

Through Mai World, our child and youth voices project, we work with schools and community groups to provide a way for children and young people to contribute their views and share their voice. We do this so they can be heard by a range of audiences, and their voices can influence government and community decisions that may affect them.

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Message from Andrew Becroft and Lorraine Kerr

Children have the right to express a view, and have that view given due weight, in matters that affect them

[Article 12, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child].

Tēnā koutou, taloha ni, nǐ hǎo, bonjour, talofa lava, namaste, malo e lelei, bula vinaka, kia orana, fakalofa lahi atu, hello,

This engagement is a three-way collaboration between children and young people, the Office of the Children’s Commissioner, and the New Zealand School Trustees Association.

New Zealanders made a promise to ensure tamariki and rangatahi o Aotearoa (children and young people of New Zealand) have a say and have their voices heard about matters that affect them when the Government agreed to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1993.

Hearing and incorporating the views of children and young people delivers better and more robust decisions. It also confirms and develops their capacity to act independently, make their own choices and actively participate as New Zealand citizens.

Few things affect children’s lives more than their educational experiences. Attending school is the greatest commitment children make outside of their homes.

This engagement was initiated to help ensure that children and young people’s voices contribute to the development of the Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities (National Education and Learning Priorities) that were introduced into the Education Act 1989 in May 2017. The National Education and Learning Priorities will allow the Minister of Education to direct schools on the priorities they must concentrate on for the next five years. Schools will be expected to report progress on meeting these priorities to the Ministry of Education each year, so they will be an important part of the schooling system.

As educators, policymakers and advocates we often talk of the need to be ‘child-centred’ in our approach to education, yet we rarely provide mechanisms for the people at the centre of our work to be heard directly. Our decision to engage with children and young people directly, and provide a vehicle for their views to be heard, is an important way of demonstrating our commitment to putting students at the heart of what we do.

We have listened carefully to what students have to say about their learning and educational experiences. And we are determined that children’s voices will guide our advice on what the National Education and Learning Priorities might include.

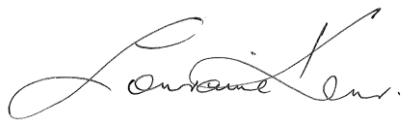
Some of the children and young people told us that they really like going to school, and that it meets their needs well. Unfortunately this is not the case for all children and young people. Many others told us that school is just ok, or even that they'd rather not be at school. In this engagement, we particularly wanted to hear from children and young people not well served by the current education system.

It may be tempting to dispute or dismiss what these young people say. But we need to remind ourselves this reflects how a diverse group of children and young people view their experience of the education system today. As adults with influence, we consider it our job to take this seriously and use it to inform action in the education sector.

This report explores the six key insights that we drew from the findings of our engagement. We hope that you will read it and be galvanised in your commitment to supporting children's voices in the education sector.

We would like to acknowledge the children and young people who have shared their experiences of the education system with us through this project; we value your expertise on education.

Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou,



*New Zealand School Trustees
Association President,
Lorraine Kerr.*



*Children's Commissioner,
Judge Andrew Becroft.*



Education matters to me: Insights at a glance

The Children's Commissioner and the School Trustees Association have a shared interest in ensuring the National Education and Learning Priorities are grounded in the needs and lived experiences of all tamariki and rangatahi in Aotearoa. During October and November 2017, we engaged with 1,678 children and young people face to face and through online surveys to hear their views on education. We did this to help ensure children and young people's voices contribute to the development of National Education and Learning Priorities that will be introduced for the first time in 2018.

In undertaking this work, we are building on what the Office of the Children's Commissioner and the New Zealand School Trustees Association have heard from children and young people in the past, and our combined knowledge of the challenges to educational success for many children and young people. We engaged with a diverse group of children and young people, some of whom would be termed 'priority learners' by the Ministry of Education, including many Māori and Pacific Peoples, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, those with diagnosed learning difficulties, and children and young people with disabilities. We heard from these children and young people in primary and secondary schools, alternative education units, early childhood centres, kōhanga reo, kura kaupapa Māori, learning support units, home-based schools and teen parent units. We met with children and young people in the Auckland, Tauranga, Wellington and Christchurch regions.

This section summarises who we talked to, what we asked, and what children and young people told us.

Glossary

āhuru mōwai	safe space
ingo	desire
kaiako	teacher
kaikiri	racist
māuiui	sick
orotau	understand
rangatahi	youth
tamariki	children
whakamā	embarrassed
whakawhanaungatanga	building relationships

Throughout this report we share many quotes from children and young people. When we do, we will indicate the type of learning centre that the child or young person is attending, and their ethnicity.

For many reasons, categorising ethnicity can be subjective. In this report, some children and young people chose not to share their ethnicity. Ethnicities cited from face to face engagement are self-identified and based on the terminology used by the children and young people, and if from survey responses, are the terms used by StatsNZ Tatauranga Aotearoa.

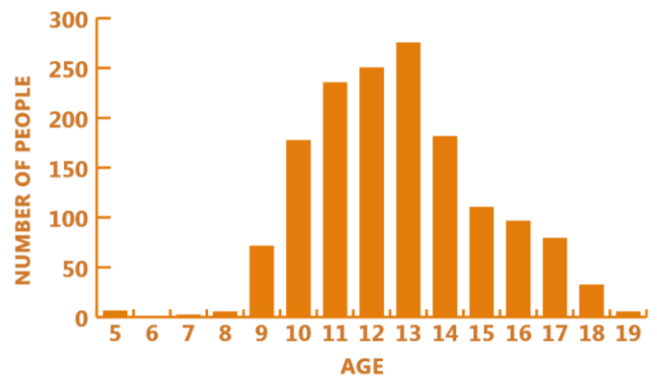
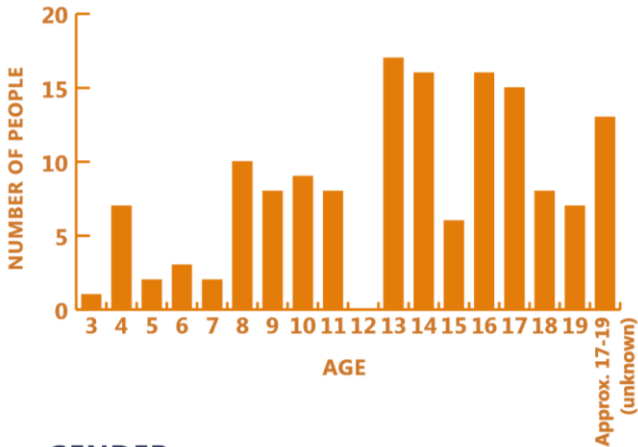
Throughout this report we have used the terms 'tamariki / children' and 'rangatahi / young people' interchangeably to refer to all children that we spoke with.

Who did we talk with?

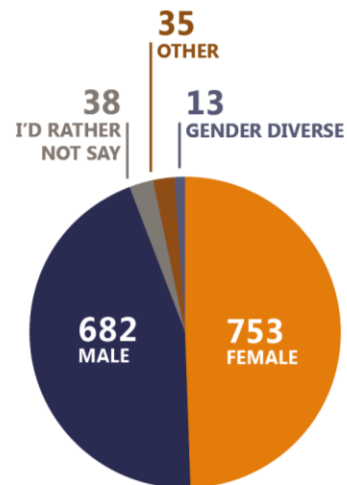
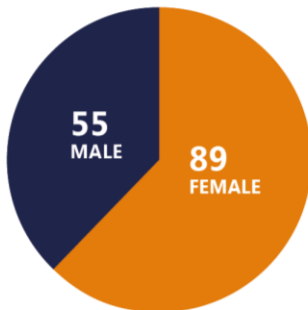
144 Face to face engagements
Kanohi ki te kanohi

1534 Online responses
Urupare ā-ipurangi

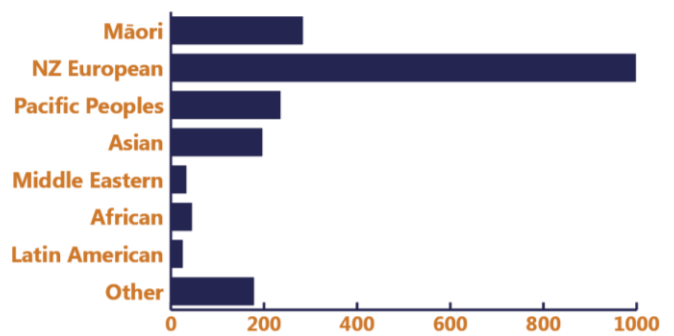
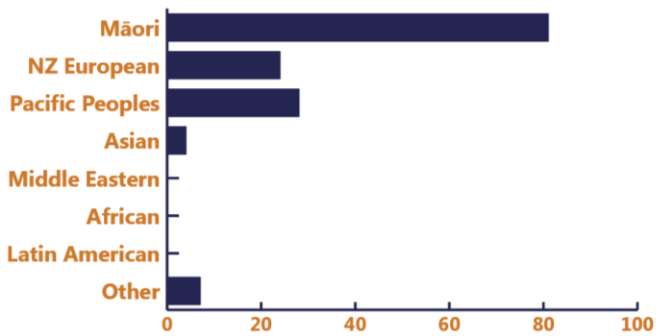
AGE



GENDER



ETHNICITY



What did we ask?

We wanted to hear from children and young people about their experiences; in particular what is working well and how things could be better for them. We started from an informed position regarding some of the well-documented challenges in the education system, as well as the views of children and young people from previous engagements. From this foundation, we were able to focus our engagements with children and young people on the following six areas of enquiry:

- Achievement**
- Emotional environment / support networks**
- Transitions**
- Engagement / disengagement**
- Experiences of tamariki and rangatahi Māori**
- Key improvements children and young people would make to their school.**

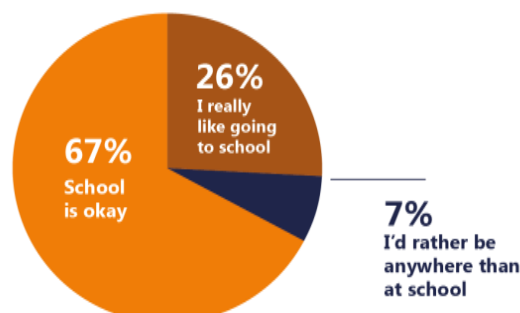
The tamariki and rangatahi we spoke to openly shared their experiences and views, and we have prepared detailed reports on each of the above areas of enquiry. However, when considered together, there are re-occurring themes that emerged as insights across all areas. Each of these insights is detailed in this report.

What did children and young people tell us?

The majority of children and young people that we surveyed indicated that *school is ok*, but we want school to be great.

Many students who responded to the survey enjoy school and believe that it meets their needs well. This reflects what we know about the proportion of children and young people for whom the current education system works well. Through our face to face engagements we did not shy away from talking with groups that the current system is not serving. We found common experiences shared by many children and young people. Tamariki and rangatahi Māori spoke of their unique experiences of New Zealand's education system. We heard common insights about marginalisation and discrimination from children and young people who are Pacific Peoples; those with disabilities; and those who have been excluded from school. Many of the children and young people we spoke to felt that their unique learning needs are not being met.

How do you feel about school most of the time?



We heard about the importance of teachers, and that supportive relationships with teachers, family, and peers were crucial for learning. In some instances, we heard how teachers were making positive differences despite adverse conditions.

“If my teacher believes in me, sees potential in me and teaches me in the way I learn best, I will achieve more.” *(Secondary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

Children and young people across a diverse range of engagement groups spoke about three key factors, which they require to have a successful experience in education. These were: **a great teacher; a supportive and involved family, and friends.**

While many children and young people believe all of these elements are needed in order for them to maintain a positive sense of belonging and identity, the most common response by children and young people was that a great teacher can make a huge difference to their experience in education.

Six key insights

From our analysis of what children and young people told us, we identified six key insights about how they experience school, and what could be improved in the education system to help make them experience it more positively. Even for those who reported relatively positive outcomes of education, there were things that could be improved. Each of these insights are detailed in this report.

1. Understand me in my whole world

Children and young people talked about how they want to be seen for who they are, and to be understood within the context of their home life and experiences.

2. People at school are racist towards me

Many children and young people told us they experience racism at school and are treated unequally because of their culture.

3. Relationships mean everything to me

Children and young people talked about the range of significant relationships that enable them to achieve or prevent them from achieving. Many told us that they cannot begin learning unless they have a trusted relationship with their teacher.

4. Teach me the way I learn best

Children and young people want their teacher to teach them according to their strengths and unique abilities. Learning content was also important, some want to be learning things that they see as relevant to their lives, and their futures.

5. I need to be comfortable before I can learn

Children and young people from all different learning environments stressed the importance of feeling happy and comfortable before they can learn and the impact that their learning environment has on their wellbeing.

6. It's my life - let me have a say

Children and young people experience a lack of choice or participation in decision making about their own lives and schooling. They really want to have a say in their education, and they want teachers to involve them in their learning.

Our recommendations

The insights in this report are drawn from the voices we heard throughout this engagement. They are consistent with what we have heard in previous engagements.

Many children and young people told us of positive learning experiences. The majority see school as an important contributor to their present wellbeing and future aspirations. But this experience is not shared equally by all students. We heard common themes about marginalisation, discrimination and unmet learning needs from children and young people in a range of settings.

These insights are consistent with many well-known elements of good practice in education policy and practice. But the inconsistent and negative experiences we heard show that we are not achieving the consistent standard of education we desire for our children. What children and young people have told us can point educators and policy makers to the system enablers that are needed to ensure policy and practice move toward providing a positive learning experience for all tamariki and rangatahi. Using these insights, and the findings in our suite of background papers, to develop the National Education and Learning Priorities provide an opportunity to bring a whole-of-system focus to these areas requiring system change.

We encourage the Ministry of Education to undertake further consultation with a broader range of children and young people to test the insights in this report, and perhaps identify additional insights. In fact, we believe this consultation should be embedded as part of the standard process of developing the Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities. This engagement should explicitly include children and young people who are absent, excluded, or for whom the current system is not working well.

The New Zealand School Trustees Association and the Office of the Children's Commissioner offer two strategic recommendations:

- 1. The Minister of Education considers appropriate systemic responses to the experiences of students highlighted in this report when issuing the Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities.**
- 2. The Ministry of Education engages with children and young people as part of the Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities consultation process, and commits to including this engagement as an on-going element of the National Education and Learning Priorities in the future.**

Our education system needs to cater for *all* of the children and young people of Aotearoa New Zealand. The children and young people we spoke to have a great sense of hope for what education can offer them. It is our job now to listen and act on what we have heard.

Six key insights



1. Understand me in my whole world

He kākano ahau i te wao nui tāngata



2. People at school are racist to me

He ahurea kaikiri tō te hunga kura



3. Relationships mean everything to me

He mea nui te hononga tangata



4. Teach me the way I learn best

Whangaia tēnei manu kai matauranga



5. I need to be comfortable before I can learn

He āhuru mōwai, he ingo matauranga



6. It's my life – let me have a say

Whakatūa tōku rangatiratanga



1 Understand me in my whole world

He kākano ahau i te wao nui tāngata

“Teachers focus on those they think can achieve and not the other. Focus on those who don’t want to as they need it the most as they are probably going through something.” *(Student in learning support unit, Tongan / New Zealander / Samoan / British)*

“The teachers look after us – they recognise we might be tired because baby has had a bad night – we feel like we belong, for the first time we really feel like we belong.” *(Student in teen parent unit, Pākehā)*

[What would have helped you at school?] “Learning more about te reo Māori e.g having a class to go to at least twice a week about te reo Māori.” *(Primary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

“Make te reo Māori compulsory in all schools!” *(Primary school student, Pākehā)*

“Primary was easier, but it did not mentally prepare me for secondary school. I never understood that there was going to be a whole lot of stress, tears and pressure. I wasn’t told that secondary school was going to be a rollercoaster ride, I thought it would be a breezy train ride with roses and flowers. I wasn’t comfortable being in a really big school and it made it hard for me to feel like I was supported or even noticed unless I was doing good or really bad. I wish I was taught what secondary school would be like.”

(Secondary school student, Samoan)

“I ended up being a bully. I didn’t get what I needed at home. It made me bully people for the things I didn’t have.” *(Student in alternative education, Tongan / New Zealander / Samoan / British)*



1 Understand me in my whole world

He kākano ahau i te wao nui tāngata

Children and young people talked about how they want to be seen for who they are, and to be understood within the context of their home life and experiences.

Get to know me

Children and young people want their teachers to get to know them and talk to them about things outside of school. Some survey responses we received said they would change nothing about their school. We heard from these respondents that school was great as it is and that their teachers and other students are welcoming and supportive. However, through the survey and face to face engagements we also heard from children and young people about how teachers could be more sensitive to the things going on in their lives. They talked about issues such as family or relationships, family violence, poverty and grief. Struggling with these types of issues directly influences their ability to maintain engagement in school; they want their teachers to know and understand that.

[What puts me off being at school is] **“Family circumstances like I can’t afford to do things or when I need to do things for my family and church.”** *(Secondary school student, Tongan)*

Young people want to be understood. Some young people (particularly those in alternative education or teen parent units) talked about being angry on the outside but on the inside feeling really sad or experiencing the stress of bad things happening at home.

During one of the focus groups the topic of bullying was raised. The group dismissed bullying behaviour. For some of the young people, especially those who have grown up where domestic violence, swearing and aggressive behaviour is normal, behaviour that was identified as bullying was relatively minor.

This normalisation of anti-social and bullying behaviour can be confusing for young people. This does not mean these young people fail to experience the negative feelings that are usually associated with bullying. They reported still feeling anxiety and sadness in some situations, but their tolerance for this sort of behaviour was impacted by their exposure to this behaviour outside of school. One young person explained that to call the behaviour bullying would be to show weakness.

“Attitudes come from how you are raised. Someone can come from a violent or caring family. How you are raised. I was suspended from school. I used to take the violence from my home to school. The course is a good space for now. I’m going through a heap at home – divorce and violence.” *(Student in alternative education unit, Tuvaluan/Samoan/Rarotongan (Cook Island))*

For a small number of students, they see escaping from their home environment as an important benefit of being at school.

“Being away from home.” *(Primary school student, NZ European)*

“Away from brothers and sisters.” *(Primary school student, NZ European)*

“Getting away from home.” *(Primary school student, NZ European)*

“Being away from my parents...I view it as a safe haven away from where I live.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European).*

We heard the above views through our online in school surveys. The students that reported school as an opportunity to be away from their home environment may appear to be doing well in primary or secondary school, but clearly have things happening at home for which they may value support.

If you want to help me, you need to know what my goals are

Children and young people have different measures of achievement. For some young people we spoke to, being the first generation to complete secondary school is a huge achievement for both them and their family. For others, being the first to go to university is one of their measures of achievement. For some children and young people, being at school and completing NCEA is just something that they expect to do. The common theme among all of the children and young people we spoke to is the role that their family and whānau play in defining what achievement looks like for them, and their motivations or expectations for education.

“My family didn’t finish school, so I wanted to finish but it got really hard to stay in school.” *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

Recognise my strengths

Children and young people want their strengths highlighted and to be given positive reinforcement and encouragement. They want to be noticed for when they’re behaving well or succeeding, not just be told off for misbehaviour. For many, school is like that most of the time. For others, it is not.

“Get a new principal who genuinely cares about us and focuses more on what we do well than everything we’re doing wrong.” *(Secondary school student, Pākehā)*

“Include Māori performing arts more and include carving classes and being looked at in a good way.” *(Secondary school student, Māori)*

One young person talked about how teachers don’t talk to her or seem to understand her. They were unlikely to ask her for her views. She reflected:

“I am a library, quiet but filled with knowledge - it’s dumb [that I’m not asked].” *(Student in alternative education unit, Māori)*

To understand me, understand te ao Māori

Tamariki and rangatahi Māori who have grown up with a Māori world view want their teachers to have a better understanding of their views.

“When you leave a full unit in Māori you lose stuff. Doing hāngī and performances for tourists is stuff we already know. Our kaiako are white. So [they] don’t know tikanga and reo. That’s the only bad thing. They see our potential but they lack culture.” (Student in teen parent unit, Māori)

Many rangatahi and tamariki Māori shared with us that they wished all people could understand and talk te reo Māori. This view was shared by rangatahi who are fluent or near fluent in speaking te reo. For tamariki and rangatahi in immersion-speaking kura kaupapa Māori, some feel that they are treated as outsiders for speaking te reo in public and in schools, as most students do not speak or know te reo Māori.

“Everyone should have to learn both Māori and English. It would be better and everyone would be able to say my name right and I wouldn’t have to be embarrassed or angry.” (Student in kura kaupapa, Māori)

Some Māori who cannot speak te reo, shared how they felt embarrassed and uncomfortable when people speak to them in te reo Māori, as they cannot understand it. They can sometimes feel pressured by teachers if they are expected to know tikanga and other aspects of their culture or reo. We have heard from children and young people that this can be a disempowering experience for young Māori who are disconnected from their cultural identity and expected to speak on behalf of their culture.¹

“We are expected to know our language, to know songs and the haka but we aren’t given the opportunity to actually learn it. It just makes me feel bad.” (Student in alternative education, Māori)

On the other hand, some young Māori are deeply connected to their tikanga; one young person said they feel mauiui (sick) when there is no provision to hongī in the morning before going into class, because he feels the intense need to share the breath of life.

I need to be supported when things change, or when they go wrong

Many of the comments we heard about transitions between year levels or between schools identified things that their teacher or peers did to support them and help them cope with the changes. However, some children and young people still talked about transitions between schools or schooling levels (e.g. primary to intermediate or


¹ See our previous report on young people’s experiences of their culture:
<http://www.occ.org.nz/assets/Uploads/20-09-2017-Mai-World-Culture-Report.pdf>

secondary to alternative education) as difficult. Their comments indicated uncertainty, fear, and feeling that the people around them don't care what they are going through.

“Sometimes I feel what we learn is unnecessary, we should be prepared for the stress and anxiety we face at secondary school, I feel if primary school prepared us for the reality of the workload we probably wouldn't be so stressed.” *(Secondary school student, Samoan)*

“If there were better teachers, teachers that cared, then maybe it would have made a difference. When I went to high school there were loads of people and for ages it felt like we were all just there but didn't know what to do or how to get help.” *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

“When I'm comfortable, I'm surrounded by people I know and can connect with the type of people/teacher.” *(Student in secondary school, Māori)*

A large, orange, rounded speech bubble with a tail pointing to the right, containing text.

“Instead of teachers focus on those they think can achieve and not the other. Focus on those who don’t want to as they need it the most as they are probably going through something.” *(Student in learning support unit, Tongan/ New Zealander/ Samoan/ British)*



2 People at school are racist towards me

He ahurea kaikiri tō te hunga kura

"I would make GLOBAL history compulsory so people know how not to offend people from scarred races..." (Secondary school student, African)

"Racism exists – we feel little and bad." (Student in alternative education unit, Māori)

"I would make ethnicity equal, no one should be higher or lower than any other. I come from a very diverse school, so I would make everyone feel recognised and that their identity matters. No group is greater but understanding each other's qualities by celebrating their culture. Help those who are failing, praise the high achievers and support the ones that are really struggling. Invest in my teachers so that they teach with passion, that it's not just about teaching but more than that, you change lives." (Secondary school student, Māori)

"Treat everyone as equals and don't jump to conclusions because of race." (Secondary school student, Māori / Pacific / European)

[When you started school, is there something that would have helped you feel happy at school?]
"Less Racism." (Secondary school student /Asian/Middle-Eastern)

"What also puts me off are the teachers telling me to give up saying I am not going to pass level 3 without even checking my credits. I sense stereotypes in my teacher's eyes and gestures and how they act towards me makes me feel like leaving." (Secondary school student, Samoan)

"We feel like we are failing when we are constantly reminded that we are not doing well – Principal use to bring out all these graphs to show us how we are failing, and it would just piss us off." (Student in alternative education unit, Māori)

[what don't you like about school?] **"Racist people but they don't realise they are."** (Secondary school student, ethnicity undisclosed)



2 People at school are racist towards me

He ahurea kaikiri tō te hunga kura

Developing a sense of belonging is important for children and young people and a key principle of the New Zealand Curriculum.² When young people feel undervalued or underrated because of their culture, this has an impact on their sense of belonging and their experiences of education. Many rangatahi and tamariki told us they experience racism at school. We also heard from many who described feelings of being treated unequally because of their culture. This is a significant and disturbing insight.

This insight came from our face to face engagement targeted at those children and young people not well served by the current system. Tamariki and rangatahi Māori made up most of this group. Unsurprisingly, given the composition of children and young people who responded to our online survey, fewer identified racism as an issue.

Note: In other reports, we might have used terms like 'discrimination' or 'bias' to discuss the content of this section. However, the language used in this section reflects what we were told and the words that children and young people used to describe what they experience at school, which in their words, is racism.

Don't judge me - treat me fairly

Children and young people want teachers to get to know them and to give them a chance to perform well. Children and young people told us that they feel burdened with negative stereotypes, and they believe the stereotypes impact on the way teachers treat them. They talked about sensing that teachers' assumptions about them affect their relationship from the outset.

"Im real good at maths but my teacher just thinks im stupid so never gave me any time cept to get me n trouble. But if you're Pākehā its all good." (Student in alternative education unit, Māori)

Fair treatment - being included and being respected - came through as a clear theme in comments when students were asked what they would change about their school.

"Treat everyone as equals and don't jump to conclusions because of race." (Secondary school student, Māori/Pacific/European)

"Some teachers are racist. They tell you that you are not going to achieve... this makes me feel angry because it hurts... then we do stupid things and we get blamed... I don't want to get blamed... I don't." (Student in alternative education, Tuvaluan/Samoan/Rarotongan (Cook Island)).

"Just cause we are Māori doesn't mean we are stupid." (Secondary school student, Māori/Pacific/European)

² <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Principles/Cultural-diversity>

Many rangatahi shared experiences of racism from their relationships with their teachers. Rangatahi said they feel judged and that they are expected to fail or are set up to fail by their teachers. These feelings and shared experiences of rangatahi significantly impact their access to meaningful educational experiences.

“What also puts me off are the teachers telling me to give up – saying I am not going to pass level three without even checking my credits. I sense stereotypes in my teacher’s eyes and gestures and how they act towards me makes me feel like leaving.” *(Secondary school student, Samoan)*

“Because we’re Māoris and the teacher might think we’re dumb, don’t wanna pay as much attention to you and focus more on the white people.”
(Secondary school student, Māori)

“The negative statistics are always reminders of how we fail... why do we constantly get reminded of how we fail?” *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

Some young people told us how they had behavioural issues as a result of negative stereotyping.

“I used to have goals but not now because my teachers were [!@*!] and then I got angry and then in trouble at school and with the law. I don’t have goals. They said things like if you want to leave...leave!” *(Student in alternative education, Tuvaluan/Samoan/Rarotongan)*

“Since I am Māori, and have an anger problem, I would get into fights easy because people would say racist things to me.” *(Student in alternative education unit, Māori)*

Some rangatahi talked about experiencing discrimination from their peers because of their culture. We heard from rangatahi who attend or had attended kura kaupapa Māori about how they feel judged and misunderstood by young people from other schools. For example, in interschool competitions, they feel that they are treated as outsiders by other students for speaking te reo Māori. Rangatahi from kura kaupapa Māori expressed a sense of wanting to be understood and supported.

One young rangatahi talked about how he could only get into university if he got a special scholarship. It appeared that the rangatahi believed this was the only way Māori could go to university.

“We get scholarships for being Māori so we can go to uni.” *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

Experiences of racism at school were reported to us by rangatahi Māori, young Pacific Peoples, and some ethnic minorities. Racist behaviour was identified as coming from both teachers and other students.

“Providing basic ethnic/race knowledge and tolerance (things like teaching kids that the word N*** is bad and racist.”** *(Secondary school student, African)*

“The racist bastards that call us brown kids pieces of poo and baa baa blacksheeps - schools need to get this stuff improved.” *(Primary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

My culture is more than performance

Cultural identity is important for all young people. For Māori, Pacific Peoples and other ethnic minorities, the importance of being understood in the context of their own culture was more pronounced. Experiences of discrimination and racism came largely from young people feeling they are not understood. This presents barriers to their belonging, engagement and achievement in education.

We heard about the dominant culture for most schools in New Zealand. For young people who come from different cultural backgrounds, they are constantly searching to see themselves reflected in the culture of their educational environment.

Children and young people value being welcomed and having time for whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building) when they are new to an environment. We heard that feeling welcome is important every day. Rangatahi shared how it feels good when their teacher welcomes them and calls them by their name (and pronounces it correctly) in the mornings. Some rangatahi expressed how they knew when their teacher did not want them at school or in their class and they did not feel welcome.

When young people feel that teachers don't understand their cultural identity, they don't see their teacher as someone who can help them. One rangatahi explained that if the teacher was Pākehā, he did not expect them to be able to support him because they would not be able to understand him as Māori. The rangatahi did not speak te reo Māori, but the barriers he referred to were of cultural understanding.

“If they can't understand me how can I understand them?”
(Student in alternative education, Māori)



3 Relationships mean everything to me

He mea nui te hononga tangata

“Teacher’s support and understanding.” *(Secondary school student, Pacific/NZ European)*

“We feel welcomed, like we belong and asked how we are.” *(Primary school student, Pākehā)*

“I would change the mentality some people have toward those who have genuine issues that need to be addressed, as some teachers and staff treat students as if their worries and stress is nothing. It is treated as if we are silly for being stressed because “it’s just school” and yet we are pressured all year then told ‘You can try for excellence and think you are working hard, but it’s never hard enough’ (quote from one of my teachers). The overall pressure and stress inducing mentality is what I would change.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European; who has been to 9 schools)*

“The kind of teacher you have determines whether you like and are happy at school – sometimes teachers don’t let you learn what you want or how you want.” *(Primary school student, Pākehā)*

“Friends make me want to go to school; having different subjects to do and having things to look forward to is good; something different to the same old routine; variety is important.” *(Primary school student, Pākehā)*

“I feel like our class here is like a small family, like we are not separated as teachers and students, but we feel like we are working together and can achieve together. Our teachers really want to help us and recognise our strengths and when we do well.” *(Student in alternative education, undisclosed ethnicity)*

“Get good teachers, teachers that know how to work with different youth and know how to talk to them without pissing them off.” *(Not in employment, education or training, undisclosed ethnicity)*



3 Relationships mean everything to me

He mea nui te hononga tangata

Children and young people talked about the range of significant relationships that exist in their worlds and how these relationships either enable them to achieve or prevent them from achieving. They talked about their peer relationships, their relationships with their teachers, with their learning community, and the importance of the relationship between their learning community and their whānau or family.

Many children and young people told us that they can't begin learning unless they have a trusting relationship with their teacher.

My friends are my go-to

Children and young people stressed the importance of supportive peer relationships in their learning environment. For many young people, friendships with peers are what keep them going to school. Their place within their whānau, hapū, or family is also integral to their learning journey. The way that education is viewed by children and young people's families and communities is seen to have an impact on their happiness and success at school.

For secondary school survey respondents, spending time with friends is the top motivator to be in school (26%). For primary and intermediate, 'being with my friends' was the second most important thing about school (27%), after 'learning' (31%). A third of those who chose 'something else' stated "friends and learning".

"Without school you wouldn't have many friends." *(Secondary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

Children and young people said that their friends, family, and teachers who care were crucial to them staying engaged in school or their course. When they feel alone and without role models, or find their teachers annoying, or have no social connections, they are more likely to become disengaged from school. As one young person describes it:

"To feel good about going back to school, the school and teachers would need to be warm, friendly, caring, helpful and believe in me... But they need to be consistent." *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

Conversely, a breakdown of friendships or harmful relationships with peers (bullying and peer judgment) is a key factor that the children and young people we spoke to recognised as causing them to disengage from school. This could lead to not attending school. One young child who has diagnosed learning difficulties told us that:

"Every school should have its own café because people can meet there and see each other." *(Home-schooled student, Pākehā)*

Some children and young people have support people outside of their whānau and school, such as social workers or youth workers. Young people talked about the

benefits of having access to support people through learning support centres in a way that doesn't happen through mainstream schools. We heard that this helps them and empowers them to learn.

I need my teacher to respect me

The quality of the relationships that children and young people have with their teachers is extremely important. Having a strong relationship means that the teacher gets to know them as an individual, but tamariki and rangatahi also stress that their class is a community that needs to work cohesively through positive relationships. If they are treated fairly, and with respect, they are able to benefit from one-on-one time.

Children have clear ideas about the attributes of a good teacher. Two six year olds at primary school told us:

“One that’s not too shouty.”

“A nice one.”

“They are friendly, they greet you in the morning and are happy to see you.”

“When I share my news from the day before or ask a question they respond in a positive way.”

Children and young people also talked about the time that they get with their teacher. They wanted more one on one time and individual attention from their teacher.

I need my teacher to believe in me to achieve

We heard the difference it can make to have teachers believe in the potential of tamariki and rangatahi to achieve. Responses from young people indicated that having a good teacher or teachers can have the biggest positive impact on their ability to achieve in education.

“When people recognise me and my skills I feel I can do better and achieve more.” *(Student in secondary school, Māori)*

“My teachers and my deans had always told me what a big change I’ve gone through from last year to this year especially. They’ve always believed in me even when I never listened to them and always disobeyed the school rules. I’m grateful for their help as they’ve pushed me to keep going. I’m grateful for those people.” *(Student in secondary school, Māori)*

Students talked about becoming progressively less motivated in class if they sensed the teacher did not believe in them and expected them not to achieve much. Ultimately, this limits the ability of tamariki and rangatahi to succeed on their educational journey.

[What helps you achieve at school?] “Being around good people like good friends and teachers who are cool instead of being dicks all the time and making me feel like I shouldn’t be in class. There are some classes I enjoy so I

try hard to attend and to achieve in them, but other classes I don't care."

(Student in secondary school, Māori)

[What helps you achieve in school?] When the teachers are cool and are good, when I can connect to them and I don't feel like they are just there to hassle me. – *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

We heard from some tamariki and rangatahi of how they wanted to achieve and succeed in school; however, they felt they weren't given the opportunities or the encouragement to do so. Tamariki and rangatahi told us they would ask for help from their teachers and feel they were not given the help they needed or were made to feel embarrassed when they did ask, which resulted in them no longer asking for help.

"I felt I was ignored at other schools. I struggled a lot, if I asked for help I was told just to move on to the next one when I wanted to understand it... Because they told the whole class that we should know as individuals – [teachers] expect us to know." *(Student in teen parent unit, Māori)*

Children and young people told us that good teachers really matter to them.

Good teachers, teachers who are helpful, they make the difference between me achieving and failing. *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

I want to make my whānau proud

Young people want to make their family proud by learning new things. For many, their family is their motivation.

"I just think that my motivation is my parents and the fact that they've put a lot of their time and money to invest in my future and I really want to give back what they've given me. I want to make them proud and let them know that I don't only come to school for friends or to do certain activities for six hours of my day five times a week, but I want to exceed and succeed on behalf of them and show others that they raised a good kid." *(Secondary school student, Pacific Peoples)*

"What really keeps me going to school is honestly my family. Being a Samoan, life is challenging but I knew that education is where my parents would look at me for refuge, for I was and still am their investment." *(Secondary school student, Samoan)*

We heard from mothers in teen parent units who felt their children were their biggest motivation for achieving. They felt that where their school environment supports them to support their children then it supported their own ability to achieve their educational goals.

"I feel loved here, comfortable, supported, my surroundings, my child at creche right next door, love love love my kura." *(Student in teen parent unit, Māori)*

“Success in school would look like teachers and students building a relationship together so students can feel comfortable.” *(Student in teen parent unit, Māori)*

“I want my boy growing up happy, a roof over his head, food on the table and clothes on his back. Setting goals and achieving them.” *(Student in teen parent unit, Māori)*

“Striving through school to be the best you can be for yourself, your children and your family.” *(Student in teen parent unit, Māori)*

When things change for me, relationships are really important

Young people who have changed schools frequently (especially those in alternative education) talked about how much they miss their friends when they are excluded from mainstream school.

The students who responded to our survey found the transition to secondary school the hardest – harder than getting a new teacher, or starting primary or intermediate school. In response to the question *‘What do you think could make these changes better for students?’* the most commonly identified suggestions were: teachers; introductions and induction; and relationships and peer support (in that order).

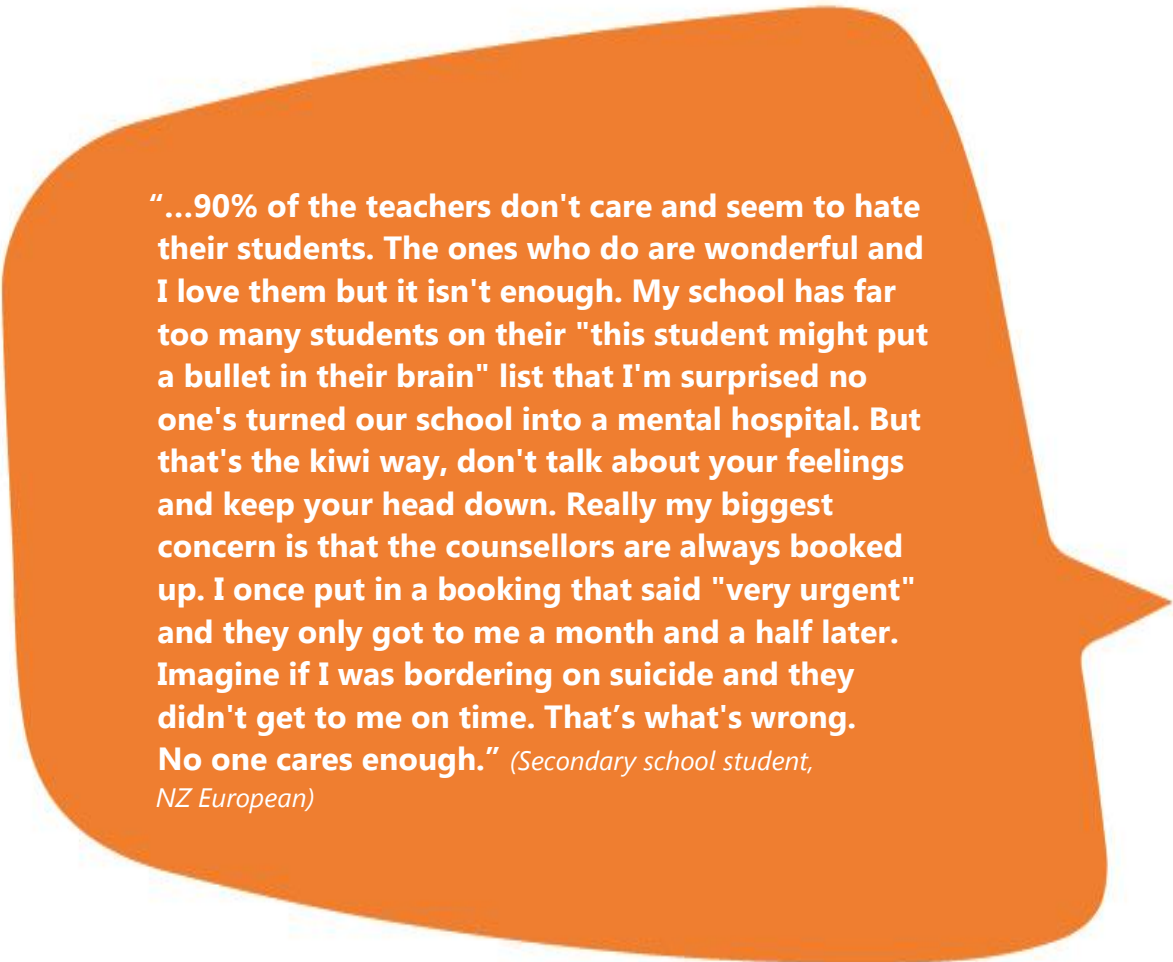
“You could choose a friend to be with you in your class.” *(Primary school student, NZ European/Māori)*

“Be able to choose at least one friend to be in the majority of your classes.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European/Māori)*

Rangatahi who have stable relationships with teachers are better able to stay connected to school even if other aspects of their education are not going well. Poor relationships are connected in young people’s minds with disengagement from education.

“Teachers need to get along with students and show more love so the students can feel safe and wanted... teachers should be security, listen, care and help you, be willing to help.” *(Student in alternative education, Tongan/New Zealander/Samoan/British)*

“Good teachers, teachers who are helpful, they make the difference between me achieving and failing.” *(Not in employment, education or training, ethnicity undisclosed.)*

An orange speech bubble with a tail pointing to the right, containing a quote from a secondary school student.

"...90% of the teachers don't care and seem to hate their students. The ones who do are wonderful and I love them but it isn't enough. My school has far too many students on their "this student might put a bullet in their brain" list that I'm surprised no one's turned our school into a mental hospital. But that's the kiwi way, don't talk about your feelings and keep your head down. Really my biggest concern is that the counsellors are always booked up. I once put in a booking that said "very urgent" and they only got to me a month and a half later. Imagine if I was bordering on suicide and they didn't get to me on time. That's what's wrong. No one cares enough." (Secondary school student, NZ European)



4 Teach me the way I learn best

Whangaia tēnei manu kai matauranga

“What I really could have helped me college wise - as if there was a cultural support group where people within the same culture could come as one and study or socialise.”

(Secondary school student, Samoan)

“A lot of people I know don’t attend classes like English because they are not interested in them but will go to engineering, building and hospitality. They want to do more of these subjects to help connect into jobs. A lot of mates want to go to trade academies but they haven’t been able to get enough NCEA credits to go. Schools need to change so that they support young people to be able to go to academies.” *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

“It was scary to come and be in a big school, but when I was welcomed at the LSU it meant I felt included and safe.” *(Student in learning support unit, Māori)*

“The teacher you have is very important. For every child a good teacher means something different. For me, I like teachers who are more structured and who want me to learn. I was still bored in some classes, but the good teachers taught me the process and structure like writing an introduction, middle and end rather sending me off to simply write something.” *(Home-schooled student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

“Different groups for learning, some kids are not being challenged at all, (including myself) and are not learning much.” *(Primary school student, Pākehā)*



4 Teach me the way I learn best

Whangaia tēnei manu kai matauranga

Children and young people want to be taught in ways that work for them. Some children talked about feeling invisible in busy learning environments, and wanting more one on one support from their teacher. The content of their learning was also important, some of the young people that we spoke to want to be learning things that they see as relevant to their lives, and their futures.

I want my teachers to engage me the way I need to be engaged, on content that is relevant to me

We asked children and young people responding to our survey to rate how well their school was doing on a number of factors that enable them to achieve. Unsurprisingly, about 70% rated their schools well. This aligns with a variety of education statistics that show about 70% of students doing well in the current system.

However, some children and young people felt that their learning needs aren't being adequately met. They talked about the use of devices (either too much or not at the best times), sitting too much, and having loud and busy learning environments with too many children in the space. Other rangatahi talked about getting progressively more isolated:

“I was the class clown and the teacher would get annoyed because I was distracting but I felt they didn't give me attention or support me...this touched my heart. I got kicked out of class, then I had gaps and I felt lost. Their attitude was to go catch up on your own.” *(Student in alternative education, Tongan/New Zealander/ Samoan/British).*

Children and young people told us that they would be more likely to engage if they learned about things relevant to their lives. One young person used the example of history – she has learned about World War II, but not the New Zealand Wars, she wants to know about Parihaka, not Guy Fawkes. Her music lessons are about composers from the 18th century, rather than the music that she connects with and has an interest in.

Some of the rangatahi we spoke with in teen parent units are grateful to be supported to learn practical things that assist with their day-to-day realities, such as support to access their benefit entitlements, working towards their driver's licence, assistance for further study and preparation to go into work. We also heard from young people in secondary schools who see getting a driver's licence as something they want to work towards as part of their education.

“Achievement means success. To me it means completing something of yours, the correct way and feeling good about yourself after completing it. I need to achieve my goals which include school, my exams and hopefully achieving my level 2 NCEA. I want to go for my driver's licence and I need to student for it the achieve it. I also want to get a job and change myself and the way I act and respond to things including the way I treat my family, friends and myself. There are big achievements I hope to success in.” *(Secondary school student, Māori)*

Many rangatahi shared how they want to be able to choose to study things they find useful. If they want to be a scientist then they can study science; if they want to be a builder then they should be able to study things that help them become a builder. This suggests that young people want to see the links between the content they are learning and their aspirations and interests.

We don't all learn the same way

Through talking with children and young people in kohanga reo, early childhood centres, primary and secondary schools, teen parent units and alternative education centres, we heard about a range of teaching approaches. Children and young people indicated they need some changes in how their teachers teach. We heard about how they have different learning styles - and they want that to be recognised and responded to. Some tamariki and rangatahi we heard from told us this already happens for many of them, but we heard that these positive approaches are not consistently experienced by all children and young people.

One young person talked about a history lesson where their teacher taught them through song. They described how much easier it is to connect with the content when it isn't just copying notes from the board.

The children we engaged with in early childhood education settings were happily involved in their learning. This is what one young child had to say:

"I love playing on the monkey bars, puzzles, reading, drawing circles, reading books, drawing, drawing houses; I love everything, I love it all; I am going to smile all my days and all my weeks." *(Child in early childhood education, NZ European)*

Some young people in alternative education settings reflected on how they are happier there than they were in mainstream primary or secondary schools. They told us about the aspects of the learning environment that they value: the classes are smaller; the subjects are more relevant; and they have a clear learning purpose. They also enjoy being better able to learn because there is less pressure and they have the time and support to learn at their own pace. This helps them to stay focused and engaged in their education.

"Not having a school schedule that is monitored every second takes away pressure and makes learning easier." *(Student in teen parent unit, Māori)*

However, many also said that although they enjoy alternative education, they still want to return to their mainstream school because that is where their friends are.

Some children in primary school talked about the monotonous nature of their days:

"One hour for maths, one hour for reading, one hour for writing, and then again tomorrow." *(Primary school student, Pākehā)*

Another primary school student had a very different experience:

"They give us freedom to learn and play and do what you want to learn and how you want to learn." *(Primary school student, Pākehā)*

I need my teacher to recognise I have a disability that affects the way I learn best

The primary school aged children that we spoke with who have disabilities stressed the importance of an appropriate learning environment and adaptive teaching styles. They said they are affected by whether or not their teachers adapted their teaching to match their learning styles. They want their strengths to be highlighted and factored into the way that they are taught.

“Let me learn – if I write my stories, get a break, only my teacher aide helps me.” *(Primary school student, Pākehā)*

“I like that in my maths book that there are these things that help me – they use pictures and tell stories.” *(Primary school student, Pākehā)*

“Use more iPads, more maths games and less worksheets and basic facts. Time limits to finish the worksheets are too stressful and it puts too much pressure on kids and then suddenly you are too freaked out and then you forget how to do it” *(Primary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*



5 I need to be comfortable before I can learn

He āhuru mōwai, he ingo matauranga

“More breaks, longer playtime, helps with our learning as exhausted and get rid of all our energy playing and ready to learn.” *(Primary school student, Pākehā)*

“At college a teacher would stand over my shoulder, that never happens at TPU, ever!”
(Student in teen parent unit, Pākehā)

“To feel good about going back to school, the school and teacher would need to be warm, friendly, caring, helpful, believe in me... BUT they need to be consistent.”

(Student in alternative education unit, Pākehā)

“Change the way we learn, a better environment where students feel engaged. Students in back that do nothing need support, if students fail then teachers fail.” *(Student in alternative education unit, undisclosed ethnicity)*

“I would let the kids tell me what they want to learn and be and teach them that. And have kai for kids that don't have kai.” *(Student in kura kaupapa, Māori)*

“Personally, coming here [TPU] it really shines a light through my life. I came here, and a lot of girls are pregnant. I didn't have to wear a mask. No-one judges each other, we support each other. They provide transport. It feels like home. You take responsibility for who you are and your decisions. Each and every one of us is different but each of us take the first steps to get there [to achieving their goals]. I feel alive. Before I felt isolated. People living in my area, they would judge. They would look at me and give you that stare. Sometimes I'd rather stay at home than go out.” *(Student in teen parent unit, Niuean / Samoan / German / Pākehā).*



5 I need to be comfortable before I can learn

He āhuru mōwai, he ingo matauranga

Tamariki and rangatahi from all different learning environments stressed the importance of feeling happy and comfortable before they can learn and the impact that their learning environment has on their wellbeing.

My physical space impacts on my learning

Some children and young people feel invisible in large, open-plan learning spaces, and have difficulty connecting with their teachers.

Some children and young people consider class size a barrier to having their individual needs met. Both those who are struggling to keep up and those who are not being challenged by the content shared the same insight of not having their needs met in large learning environments.

Young people in alternative education compared their class sizes to what they had when they were at mainstream secondary schools, saying that smaller classes made it much easier to deal with the challenges of school. In big classes, children talked about feeling there were too many children and lots of distractions. Children with different learning needs or disabilities said that they need quiet and calm spaces; some said they become anxious without this. We know that as well as causing uncomfortable feelings, anxiety also impedes learning.

Overall, we heard mixed views from children and young people on what works for them in the classroom. Children and young people told us about their preferences and learning styles that need to be recognised and responded to before learning can take place.

The physical environment and classroom management (including behaviour management by the teacher) is the greatest theme that students in the survey identified that they would change if they could. This included fewer students in specific learning spaces; teachers keeping the class in control, so it wasn't too noisy; timetabling; day length; streaming; desks; rules; and assemblies.

Survey respondents talked about a need for gender neutral bathrooms, and unisex uniforms.

“I would also make the uniform unisex, so people can have a choice of shorts, skirts and pants no matter what gender they are. We only have one unisex toilet in the gym, but we need more than one in the school. We should also have a Q&A to help the students and teachers understand more about sexuality and gender.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

We also heard the importance of young people having pride in their school environment.

“Get more rubbish bins because the school is hory as.” *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

Help me get to know my new surroundings

Many young people said that they had good support to orient themselves to their new surroundings when they changed schools or teachers. However, some young people we spoke to said it would have helped them when they started at secondary school, if they had the chance to get to know their teachers, instead of beginning school work immediately. They shared suggestions about how transitions could be made better for them and their fellow students. Their comments are mostly based around relationships – with teachers, and other students.

“...let the students get to know their new teachers a bit.” *(Secondary school student, Māori)*

“Knowing the teacher beforehand” *(Secondary school student, European/Asian)*

“Start things slow, get to know teachers and students - maybe do half days and get to know people outside of school.” *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

“Meet everyone that’s going to be in your class - maybe create a Facebook page of just your class.” *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

Survey respondents also suggested practical things schools can do to help transitions. These included induction days, buddy-systems and:

“It would help to have a map of the college because I couldn’t find my classes a lot at the start of the year.” *(Secondary school student, Pākehā)*

Young people who have experienced exclusion from secondary school and are in alternative education settings identified how not knowing what to expect in their new school made it difficult for them to succeed there.

“It was terrifying to transition because I knew nobody, so I would not go to school because it was too scary.” *(Student in alternative education, Pākehā)*

“I don’t really remember everything, but I do remember feeling left out sometimes, especially when I didn’t understand what was happening or what I was meant to do.” *(Student in alternative education, Pākehā)*

“It was stressful because I was not used to the school or the learning.” *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

“I was nervous because I didn’t know who would be in my class or what to expect.” *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

“If we knew people before we went into the school, then we would feel safer and more comfortable.” *(Student in alternative education, Samoan)*

Young people excluded from mainstream³ schooling identified some teachers' hardening attitudes toward them, and how they were expected to cause trouble and fail. They talked about this undermining their attempts to reintegrate into school.

These students talked about their experiences of feeling hassled by teachers when they returned to the school after an initial problem, and how they would react by leaving school grounds again to get away from the feeling of being hassled.

One young person talked about how the school would suspend him, and then when he returned, teachers would tell him to go away and catch up by himself, which felt impossible.

Some rangatahi expressed frustration when teachers told them not to bother coming to school if they did not want to learn, and then phoned home and reported them for truancy.

In contrast, the experiences of young people we spoke to who had transitioned into secondary school learning support units were generally positive.

"Seeing friends here from my other school meant I felt safer." *(Student in learning support unit, Pākehā)*

"I hate changing schools because it always feels like I am going to something new where I won't fit in but when I came here I was surprised because I felt very comfortable." *(Student in learning support unit, Pākehā)*

"I was scared 'cause there was so many new people and new places but the teachers helped me feel included. Other students from the main school also helped and made me feel good to meet new people and make new friends." *(Student in learning support unit, Māori/Pākehā)*

"The subjects are better here and I understand what I have to do, I don't feel left out." *(Student in learning support unit, Samoan)*

I want to be comfortable in what I wear

Young people from a wide range of education centres raised issues about uniforms. We heard that uniforms have both positive and negative impacts on a young person's sense of belonging and identity. Some are in favour of it, and some object to it. Some are happy in principle to wear a uniform, but dislike aspects of their school's current uniform design, wanting it to be more fashionable or more practical.

Of the survey respondents who replied to a question about being able to 'change anything' to do with their school, 4% of primary and intermediate and 8% of secondary students said 'uniform' – whether to make it more comfortable – so skirts don't blow up in the wind – or to make it unisex.

³ State or State integrated school.

“I would also make the uniform unisex, so people can have a choice of shorts, skirts and pants no matter what gender they are.” *(Secondary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

Some told us it felt wrong to be required to wear a uniform in an alternative education setting. Some students from alternative education settings and teen parent units talked about being sure their school doesn't want them present at school; but that it still receives funding for them if they wear the designated uniform. They suggested that is why they have to continue to wear the school uniform even when they are not welcome to attend the school. This feels unjust to the young people.

Other young people talked about their uniform as demonstrating that they have restricted freedom and a lack of choice, which makes them feel disempowered. For some young people we spoke to, having choices, variety and being supported to express who they are is an important part of their reasons for wanting to go to school. For these young people, having to wear a uniform is symbolic of a lack of respect for all three of those things.

“I don't feel comfortable in the gendered uniform ... I think mufti would be preferred, because everyone would be comfortable, but if a uniform is required have a non-gendered one. I think our principal is old fashioned with this stuff, and LGBTQ+ stuff in general, because even the formal only just allowed same sex couples. We need to catch up.” *(Secondary school student, non-binary, NZ European)*

We heard from many tamariki and rangatahi how it can be hard to learn at school when they are frequently in trouble for not having the right uniform. These rangatahi spoke of how their teachers focused on what they were or were not wearing. They wanted their teachers to focus on teaching them, not on uniform rules.

“For the teachers and deans and everything to stop hassling students about their uniforms and shoes because at least the kids still turn up to school still ready to learn despite what things they are wearing.” *(Student in teen parent unit, Māori)*

“I did want to go to school but I kept getting in trouble for my uniform being wrong when the right jersey for winter cost 2 much. So it was easier to give up and pretend I didn't care.” *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

How I'm feeling impacts how I'm learning

Young people want to be accepted as individuals, with different learning styles, family circumstances and experiences. They want time, space, opportunities and meaningful learning experiences – that they can see the relevance of. They want their time in class to be enjoyable and their needs responded to.

Children and young people spoke with us about their learning environment being good when it is welcoming, with boundaries for acceptable behaviour as well. This supports a feeling of safety and connection, which happens when people know and care for them.

Some young people explained how their learning is interrupted by other students' disruptive classroom behaviour. They believe that there is a lack of effective follow up when disruptive behaviour continues.

Primary-aged children asked for someone to talk to when things get hard, when they feel sad or bullying is happening. Children and young people talked about their sense of self and feelings such as shame, embarrassment and isolation and the negative impact from a lack of social and emotional support.

Children and young people we spoke to notice and respond to teachers' hopes or aspirations for them. Young people talked about the difference it makes when a teacher believes in them and supports them to work towards an aspirational goal.

Children and young people responding to the survey, particularly secondary school students, explicitly raised mental health as an issue. There were a number of comments about too few counsellors and not enough understanding by teachers of mental wellbeing issues.

“I would make it compulsory for teachers to learn about mental health as 80% of the teachers I have couldn't give a rat's [!@*!] about how we feel. The teachers who actually care would all be promoted and anyone who degraded anyone for having any form of gender-dysphoria, anxiety or depression at a young age and embarrassed them in front of their class would be instantly fired. If we could have people who actually take us seriously and try to help us solve our problems that would be fantastic.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European/Middle Eastern)*

“I would like our school to put more effort into recognizing mental and emotional issues that some students have, our school seems to only want our attendance to look good. Mental health isn't something our school focuses much on, which isn't good considering how much changes teenagers go through. I want our school to be more understanding about LGBT+ people, give us a unisex uniform.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

When bullying happens, I need to know you'll deal with it and I will be kept safe

Children and young people we spoke to confirmed that bullying is a very real concern for many of them. They want to be carefully listened to and responded to when they talk to a teacher about bullying. As well as peer to peer bullying, some of the young people identified teachers hassling them and explicitly negative expectations from teachers as something that significantly impacts on their emotional wellbeing and ability to achieve at school.

A child talked about the risks of reporting bullying:

“It would be really good to have someone to go and talk to but I'd be really scared if they couldn't do something about it.” *(Primary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

Responding to an open-ended question on what they would change about their school, many children and young people responded they want changes related to bullying, racism and emotional safety.

While other issues such as class organisation and topic choice took priority for many rangatahi at secondary school, bullying and racism remains in the top ten things most frequently identified as something they would change if they could. Although the frequency of comments may not be high, the significance of bullying for the students it affects is profound.

“I would change my schools view in students. I would institute mandatory lectures for teachers on child psychology; I would also make sure that teachers are closely monitored by external parties to limit bullying”

(Secondary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)

“Giving bullies punishments so that they know it is not ok.” *(Secondary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

“I get bullied everyday always got put down, beat up, called names and much more...” *(Secondary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

“Also, I think it's important to decrease bullying and [my school] had low-key got some bullying happening but we can't tell the teachers because they won't really do anything. Just like the one kid that got bullied a few years back at [my school]. My cousin told me that student told a teacher and the teacher had done nothing and so what happened?? Yes, he committed suicide.” *(Secondary school student, Pākehā)*

“I would change all the mean teachers and get rid of bullies.” *(Primary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

“I would put more teachers on duty on very specific areas and just not one open area so that bullying could stop.” *(Primary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

“Control on bullies and the help of people who have problems at home.” *(Primary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

My social needs - Preparing and sharing kai

Children and young people told us that they feel valued when they are nourished with good food, and they feel whakama (shame) if they have to go without or ask for free kai (food) from their school or centre. Some young people told us they feel hungry but choose not to collect a supplied lunch from their school because of the shame connected to that.

We also heard from young people who prepared food together with their classmates at a teen parent unit. They said that this activity helps them feel comfortable, cared for, supported, and nurtured. In that setting, the young people take turns preparing the kai

and enjoy the responsibility, and the opportunity to show care for their peers. For some young people, being able to prepare and serve kai makes them feel better about themselves, especially if they experience difficulties contributing in other areas of their learning.

Some survey respondents said free food and a welcome would have helped them settle into a new school better, and others said, if they could change anything, they'd have cheaper canteen food and/or better quality canteen food.

“I will let students do homework every five days and make sure there’s a big play ground and a place where u can get food.” *(Primary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

[What helps you achieve?] “Making food at school and eating it after. I love the cooking class and sports. Sports help me lose weight after eating all the food haha.” *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

“Meke kai. Free lunch – cause once we have kai we can do better.” *(Student in teen parent unit, Māori)*

“We can eat lunch together at PTU. We talk to each other and we get jobs to help – have a feed, clean your mess and eat and talk together.” *(Student in teen parent unit, Māori)*



6 It's my life – let me have a say

Whakatūa tōku rangatiratanga

"I don't know why I'm in Alt Ed." *(Student in alternative education unit, Māori)*

"Teachers being more understanding and actually listening to students' reasonings for their decisions."

(Secondary school student, NZ European)

"My mum chose my intermediate for me but I don't like it, I have three others I want to go to so not feeling good about it; changing school is massive – like a really big change; being able to choose would be better; and not having so much stuff to remember; visiting the school before you go is good; knowing someone who is going too would be helpful; it helps when others say the school is really good."

(Primary school student Pākehā)

"I'd make sure every student had a say. I'd be there to help for students who are leading their lives in the wrong direction and help them create a path. I'd make MY school a happy and enjoyable place to be, where everyone wants to be. When everyone gets up in the morning super excited to go to school. That's what I want to change, because I know most children wag and don't want to, they resist to go to school but it is a necessity so they have to show up." *(Secondary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

"Listen to the students more on what's going on between the students which could be harmful. Put aside the school reputation and listen to the students for a better environment." *(Secondary school student, Fijian-Indian)*

"Make it a different school system where the students and teachers are of equal value and the students can choose whatever they want to do - search it up it's actually a very good school system." *(Secondary school student, Māori)*

"Friendly teachers who are willing to listen to thoughts and opinions right away and accept that sometimes adults aren't right." *(Secondary school student, NZ European/Middle Eastern)*



6 It's my life – let me have a say

Whakatūa tōku rangatiratanga

Many of the children and young people we spoke to experience a lack of choice or participation in decision making about their own lives and schooling. They highlight the importance of being recognised as people with equal rights to talk about decisions that affect them. They really want to have a say in their education. They want teachers to involve them in their learning.

“Make it that people see me rather than doing nothing and treating me like a nobody.” *(Secondary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

“Just talk to us, don't see us as too hard.” *(Student in learning support unit, Samoan)*

“If kids had more of a say in the dumb changes they make around our school that are unnecessary and nobody likes them. Also that teachers would be nicer.” *(Primary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)*

Among the greatest needs for improvement identified in the survey, in response to the question about how well the school helps students to achieve, was *Listen and pay attention to what students say*.

Children and young people in both the survey and face to face engagement talked about not getting a chance to explain themselves when they were being told off, or being suspended and not knowing why. One young person said that he was uncertain what behaviour of his had caused him to get into trouble and that he never knew exactly what he was meant to do differently.

“I don't get a chance to go to school. I always get suspended first week of term. I'm not sure why. There could be 100 of reasons why but I never got told. So been to 3 AEs. I want to go to school. Like hanging with my mates.” *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

Being removed from school with no-one telling you why is confusing for children and doesn't help them to modify their behaviour to meet expectations.

One young person we spoke with had started terms one, two and three at his secondary school, but at the end of week one of each term he found himself transferred to an alternative education setting, and stayed there for the remainder of the term. The process would start over the following term.

He talked about how he didn't know why he was transferred, and how he really wanted to be in his secondary school with his friends. This young person had not had these conversations with the school or his teachers. Because of that, he had not had the opportunity to express what would help him to stay engaged, and inconsistent support that was not meeting his needs had resulted in transient engagement with the education system.

His story is an example of how more inclusive learning environments, led by teachers that recognise the realities of the young people that they are teaching, could have made all the difference.

Children and young people want to be involved in decisions about them and their learning. They want to know what's happening, and be supported to plan for their future. Young people talked about when they had been presented with two subject options, but not been guided by an adult on which one might help them reach their goals for university.

“I felt unprepared.” *(Student in alternative education, Pākehā)*

We talked with some young people who have had contact with Oranga Tamariki. They had not had the opportunity to talk about their education goals with their social worker, despite it being a requirement. They also spoke about not having adequate supports to attend school, and having no one to ask for support.

“Many people I have lived with [in CYF care] aren't able to go [to school/courses] because they can't pay the fees....I live with Mum but the uniform is too expensive and we got no money from CYF. We had to borrow off WINZ and have to pay it back. Some children and young people don't have enough money to buy uniforms or just won't go to school because of this. Education should be free so everyone has the equal opportunity to go to school. Money shouldn't be a barrier.” *(Student in secondary school, Māori)*

Conclusion and Recommendations

During October and November 2017, we engaged with 1,678 children and young people on their views of education and their experiences. 1,534 students completed online surveys and 144 tamariki and rangatahi spoke directly to us in the Auckland, Tauranga, Wellington and Christchurch regions.



Recognise my potential

I ahu mai ahau i te kore

The children and young people that we spoke to through this engagement were committed and thoughtful. They really cared about their education, and wanted to share how school was for them, in the hope that it could improve. Not only did they share their experiences, but they were also very solutions focused, and had ideas about how their school could be better. They valued having their voice heard and wanted to be able to share their voice more and have a say in their everyday school experience.

Tamariki and rangatahi are experts about their own experiences. Children and young people have told us what they think about education: it is our job now to listen and act on what we have heard. We heard that children and young people care about their education. It is important to them, and they know it.

We heard from children and young people about their positive learning experiences. The majority of those we heard from see school as an important contributor to their present wellbeing and future aspirations. We heard that they care about their education. They value school for the opportunities that it can open up for them, and for many of their families and whānau. For the young parents we heard from in teen parent units, they were optimistic that their education would help their babies as well.

These positive experiences are not consistently experienced by all children and young people. Children and young people identified and shared areas of their education experience that could be improved. We heard common themes about marginalisation and discrimination from: tamariki and rangatahi Māori; children and young people who are Pacific Peoples; those with disabilities; and those who have been excluded from school. A diverse range of children and young people told us their unique learning needs are often not being met. Some are aware of the potential contribution that school can make to their lives, but feel that potential is withheld or undermined by factors such as bullying, uncertainty, attitudes of teachers, issues at home, and experiences of racism or lack of cultural understanding. We heard these stories particularly from children and young people in alternative education settings, but also from children and young people in mainstream schools and kura kaupapa Māori.

Our education system needs to cater for *all* of the children and young people of Aotearoa New Zealand. We identified 6 key insights from what the children and young people told us about their educational experiences. The insights can point educators and policy makers to the system enablers that are needed to ensure policy

and practice moves towards providing a positive learning experience for all tamariki and rangatahi.

Six key insights

- 1. Understand me in my whole world**
- 2. People are racist towards me**
- 3. Relationships mean everything to me**
- 4. Teach me the way I learn best**
- 5. I need to be comfortable before I can learn**
- 6. It's my life - let me have a say**

These insights are consistent with many well-known elements of good practice in education policy and practice. For example, they align with the intentions at the high level of the National Education Goals and curriculum principles, to more operational initiatives such as PB4L, Te Kotahitanga, ERO's evaluation indicators, and the Bullying Prevention Advisory Group.

The inconsistent and negative experiences we heard in this engagement process indicates that, despite decades of research, policy development and a plethora of initiatives and programmes, we are not achieving the consistently high standard of education we desire for our children and young people. Using these insights to develop the National Education and Learning Priorities provides an opportunity to bring a whole-of-system focus to these areas requiring system change.

While these insights reflect the children and young people's voices that we heard, we acknowledge that there were limitations in the total numbers and locations of students we engaged with. We encourage the Ministry of Education to undertake further consultation with a broader range of children and young people to test the insights in this report, and perhaps identify additional insights. In fact, we believe this consultation process should be embedded as part of the standard process of developing the Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities. This engagement should explicitly include children and young people who are absent, excluded or for whom the current system is not working well.

Our recommendations

The New Zealand School Trustees Association and the Office of the Children's Commissioner are committed to contributing to the National Education and Learning Priorities as they progress. We are also committed to keeping the voices and views of children and young people at the heart of our advice. At this point, we offer two strategic recommendations:

1. The Minister of Education considers appropriate systemic responses to the experiences of students highlighted in this report when issuing the Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities.
2. The Ministry of Education engages with children and young people as part of the Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities consultation process, and commits to including this engagement as an on-going element of the National Education and Learning Priorities in the future.

The children and young people we spoke to have a great sense of hope for what education can offer them. It is our job now to listen and act on what we have heard.

“I love playing on the monkey bars, puzzles, reading, drawing circles, reading books, drawing, drawing houses; I love everything, I love it all; I am going to smile all my days and all my weeks.”

(Child in early childhood education, NZ European)



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MANAAKITIA A TĀTOU TAMARIKI

**Children's
Commissioner**

