



MANAAKITIA A TĀTOU TAMARIKI

**Children's
Commissioner**

"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)

Education matters to me:

Engagement

Detailed report 3 of 6

'Education matters to me' series

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

March 2018

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: Engagement**, and a link to the online version at **www.occ.org.nz** or **www.nzsta.org.nz**

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Education matters to me:

Engagement

Detailed Report 3 of 6 At A Glance

*This detailed report belongs to a series that supports **Education matters to me: Key Insights. A starting point for the Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities**¹, released January 2018. A pictorial summary of the Key Insights report is included as an appendix.*

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. We engaged with children and young people face to face and through online surveys to hear their views on education. This engagement was initiated to help ensure that voices of rangatahi and tamariki contribute to the development of National Education and Learning Priorities that are to be introduced for the first time in 2018.

We wanted to hear from children and young people about their experiences; especially what was working well and how things could be better for them. We started from a position informed by the views of tamariki and rangatahi from previous engagements and some of the well-documented challenges in the education system. With this foundation we were able to focus our engagements with children and young people on six key areas of enquiry, which correlate directly to the six detailed reports:

- 1. Experiences of tamariki and rangatahi Māori**
- 2. Emotional wellbeing**
- 3. *Engagement***
- 4. 'If I were the boss' improving our education**
- 5. Progress and Achievement**
- 6. Transitions**

This is one of six supporting reports that give more detail on each of these main areas of enquiry. As real life does not fit into neat compartments, the feedback we received from children and young people quite often overlaps areas of enquiry. This means some reports share common themes, and some statements we heard have

¹ Hereafter referred to as the Key Insights report. Available at <http://www.occ.org.nz/publications/reports/education-matters-to-me-key-insights/> or <http://www.nzsta.org.nz/news-and-publications/education-matters-to-me>

been used in more than one report to help tell the story. The reports can stand alone, or be read alongside the others.

The six key insights from the whole engagement are explored further in the *Key Insights* report. You can access the insights report and all the other supporting reports on the NZSTA and Office of the Children's Commissioner websites.

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.

Engagement is the area of enquiry explored in this report.

Glossary

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

What we heard from children and young people about engagement

We wanted to hear from tamariki and rangatahi about when they felt engaged in education, and when they felt disengaged. To do this, we asked questions along the themes of:

What do you like about being here?

What makes you want to come here?

What makes you not want to come sometimes?

We talked with children and young people in a diverse range of educational environments: some were in early childhood education centres, others in primary or secondary school, and others in alternative education centres or teen parent units. It was striking that certain significant themes transcended all those settings.

We heard that a key enabler for children and young people being meaningfully engaged in school is the strength of their relationships, with friends, teachers, and between their whānau and their schooling community.

We have grouped our findings under six main headings:

- Finding 1** Get to know me
- Finding 2** Engage with me on my terms
- Finding 3** We don't all learn the same
- Finding 4** My friends are my go-to
- Finding 5** Respect me, treat me as an equal
- Finding 6** Recognise my potential, and give me hope

In the following sections we will provide more detail on the six findings on engagement.

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. Online survey response use categories 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.

"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)*

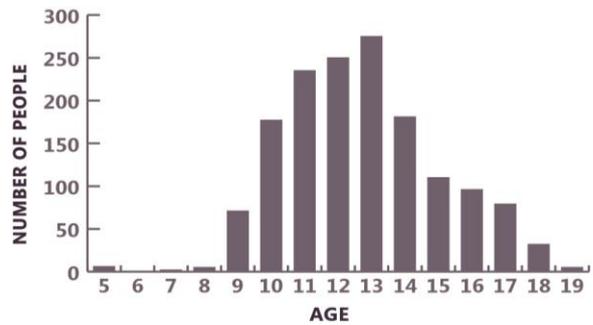
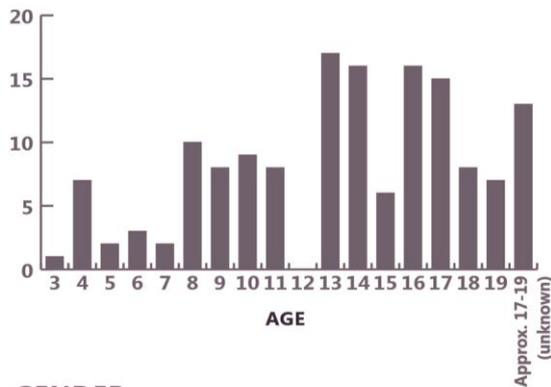
Who did we talk with?

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 heard from rangatahi and tamariki in primary, intermediate and secondary schools, alternative education centres, kōhanga reo, kura kaupapa Māori, learning support units and teen parent units, as well as home schooled students.

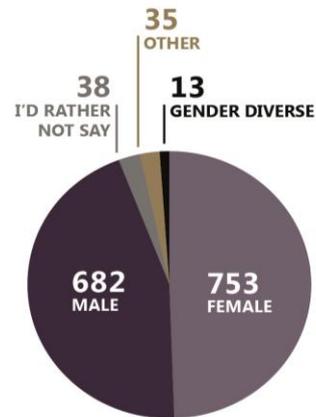
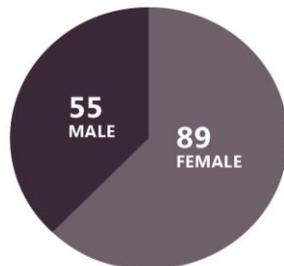
144 Face to face engagements *Kanohi ki te kanohi*

1534 Online responses *Urupare ā-ipurangi*

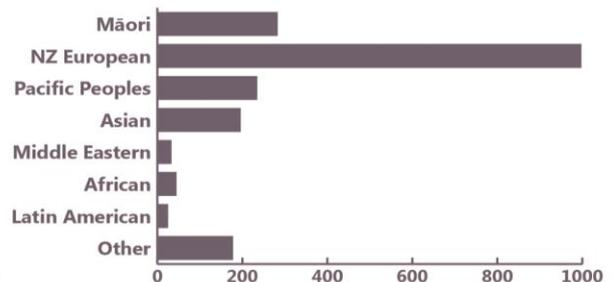
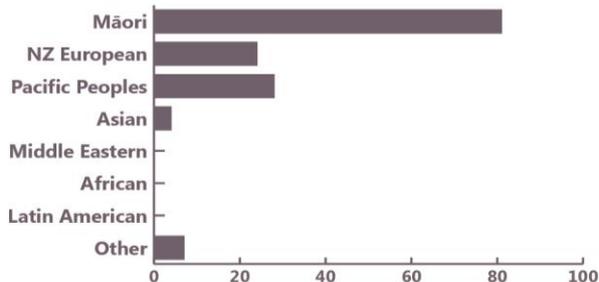
AGE



GENDER



ETHNICITY



Get to know me²

Children and young people want their teachers to get to know them and talk to them as people – not just about school.

Know what's happening for me outside of class

We 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)

"Make it that people see me rather than doing nothing and treating me like a nobody." (Secondary school student, NZ European)

"...make the teachers help out all the class not just one person." (Primary school student, NZ European)

"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 enjoy all my classes I've taken and the teachers understand where I stand." (Primary school student, Pacific People/Asian)

"Maybe reach out to students more." (Secondary school student, NZ European/Asian)

"Teachers being easier on student when students are stressed and give students time to relax during holidays." (Secondary school student, Scottish)

"I would change how teachers care for students." (Primary school student, NZ European)

² This finding is discussed further in the following reports: *Education matters to me: Progress and achievement*, *Education matters to me: Emotional wellbeing* and *He manu kai matauranga: he tirohanga Māori*

“The teachers and making sure that the teachers were considerate of the students and know if they need extending or not.” (Secondary school student, NZ European/Asian)

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 also heard that it is not only teachers that these things apply to, that children and young people want their peers to be more understanding of where they are coming from:

“To have each student appreciate each other’s learning and culture...”
(Primary school student, Tongan)

“The way other students are so quick to judge others who are different to them.” (Primary school student, NZ European/Australian)

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))

Engage with me on my terms³

Educators often talk about the need for children and young people to engage with school. To the children and young people we spoke to, it's the other way around. Engagement is about adults knowing how to engage with them, on their terms.

We asked children and young people to rate how well their school was doing on a number of factors. 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.

The classroom environment affects how we learn

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 would change the classrooms back to single classrooms with desks and stuff and have extension classes." (Primary school student, NZ European)

"The big studios because it gets too confusing at times and is really loud pretty much all the time." (Primary school student, NZ European)

"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).

I like smaller classes

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:

³ This finding is also discussed further in the following reports: *Education matters to me: progress and achievement*, *Education matters to me: Emotional wellbeing* and *Education matters to me: 'If I were the boss' - improving our 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 for these reasons, they still want to return to their mainstream school because that is where their friends are.

“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)*

Teach us stuff that’s relevant to us

Children and young people told us that it would be easier to engage with school if they had the opportunity to learn about things that are important and relevant to them.

“I would make GLOBAL history compulsory so people know how not to offend people from scarred races and address other problems that I currently have no knowledge of.” *(Secondary school student, African)*

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

“Focussing more on the problems in the world and what we can do to help. I think it would be good if we learned to be more aware about equality and whats good for our planet.” *(Primary school student, Canadian)*

“Make an entire week about learning about human rights so we can say the off by heart.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

“Schools should value creativity ... students should be freely able to share their thoughts eg how they understand things and their theories, in a fast paced environment... if schools are preparing students to get a job for barely minimum wage, MoE should look at automation and robots taking over jobs (search for "Humans Need Not Apply"). paper pushing jobs suck. if you train a human, you are making them an error prone bot. schools should seriously look into having an open discussion with compsci students about artificial intelligence, machine learning, neural networks etc. hell, get universities involved.” *(Secondary school student, British)*

“We also need to rework the English subject as we are taught many skills that not all of us will need for instance creative writing I personally do not want to become a writer...” *(Secondary school student, Pacific Peoples)*

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.

“Express the seriousness of NCEA level 1 to year 9’s tell them in a way that actually gets through to them through some kind of engagement. And try to make it fun so they can get involved otherwise they [won’t] care and will just [muck] around for the rest of the College years” (Secondary school student, Māori)

“More engaged teaching, and on topic.” (Secondary school student, NZ European)

“Stop giving us irrelevant information we don’t need.” (Secondary school student, Asian)

“Teachers be more interesting. They do less talking.” (Secondary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)

“That teachers should not shout so much and listen better.” (Primary school student, Pākehā)

“I would make the school fun, in a way that it’s not boring and at the same time educative. I would also let the lessons give real life examples so that they would understand them a lot more easier.” (Secondary school student, Asian)

“I would make social studies topic more related to early New Zealand Māori history, not just the Treaty.” (Secondary school student, undisclosed ethnicity)

Teach us life skills

We heard that school does not always provide opportunities to learn skills and topics that young people need in order to survive and thrive in their lives beyond school:

“Make life skills a compulsory subject as everyone will need these.” (Secondary school student, NZ European)

“I’d make compulsory classes that teach skills that people are actually going to need/will be helpful in the future, for example: how to garden, cook, sew, change a light bulb, use tools to be able to fix things. I feel like I’d use these skills a whole lot more than algebra.” (Secondary school student, NZ European/English/Jamaican)

“Encourage the foreign languages more, encourage more sciences, but also make leaving at year 12 easier for those going into trades.” *(Secondary school student, Pākehā)*

“Open Gateway to more people. Create other courses that can lead to apprenticeships.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

“I would create a subject about studying the behaviour traits of people so that students would know how to work with different types of people and how to act in situations with different types of people. This would also help to prevent young adults from making bad decisions and angering the wrong people.” *(Secondary school student, Māori/NZ European)*

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. 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 in part suggests that young people want to see the links between the content they are learning and their aspirations and interests.

“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 license and I need to study for it then 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. These are big achievements I hope to succeed in.” *(Student in secondary school, Māori)*

Don’t stereotype or judge us for our culture

We heard from particularly Māori and Pacific children and young people that they feel stereotyped or judged by their teachers because of their culture (we explore this in more detail in our report *Education Matters to Me: Emotional Wellbeing*). This impacted their ability to access and engage in meaningful education.

“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)*

“Just cause we are Māori doesn’t mean we are stupid.” *(Secondary school student, Māori/Pacific/European)*

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)*

We heard that some young people are frustrated by their lack of agency over what and how they can study. They find it hard to engage with subjects they have been assigned arbitrarily because of timetable constraints, when they have been denied access to courses or subjects they are interested in.

“Increased variety of languages offered. A wide variety of supported clubs and departments, not just focusing on one or two areas. More flexibility in students choosing classes and teachers. Increased relevance and improvement of schools teaching into today’s society. Teaching students to have a wide variety of specialities and interests and helping them if they are unsure.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European/German)*

“The solid structure of everyday, I'd implement more available study sessions at senior level for seniors to develop independent learning.” *(Secondary school student, Māori/NZ European)*

“I would like to be able to try out every subject/option class there is. So if I dislike a certain class I thought I would enjoy I don't have to be stuck with the choice I made earlier.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*



“I would make the Māori culture more relevant at our school. It isn't really supported at my school, at all. Even though I am not Māori , I still think it is important to appreciate it more in New Zealand schools. Because at our school they spend more money on everything but Māori culture.” *(Secondary school student, Pacific People)*

We don't all learn the same⁴

Through talking with children and young people in early childhood centres, primary and secondary schools, teen parent units and alternative education centres, we heard about a range of teaching approaches. A number of those we spoke to have different learning styles - and they want that to be recognised and responded to. Again, tamariki and rangatahi we heard from told us this already happens for many of them, but these positive approaches are not consistently experienced by all children and young people.

“Probably to have a better understanding of students. Especially since everyone comes from all walks of life. And I guess to change up the way the teachers format the learning? So it isn't just one way, but like make it more interactive so everyone feels included. Probably try be fair to every student, not only the ones that exceed academically or in sports. And yeh, just be nice...” *(Secondary school student, Pacific People)*

We learn in creative ways

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 engaged 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)*

⁴ This finding is discussed further in the following report: *Education matters to me: Emotional wellbeing*

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

Some children and young people talked about being bored by the monotony or the pace of some classes. Classes that repeat the same material, or leave gaps between one segment and the next can make it difficult to stay engaged:

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

[What would you change?] **“No learning the Treaty of Waitangi for 8 years in a row.”** (Secondary school student, Asian)

“The curriculum, it's too easy.” (Secondary school student, NZ European)

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)

“Special learning for the people who actually need it.” (Primary school student, Pacific People)

Children who responded to our survey had different views about the effectiveness of using electronic devices in the classroom:

“Use the electric device instead book.” (Primary school student, NZ European/Asian)

“Use chrome books a little bit less and use books more often.” (Primary school student, NZ European)

“I would change the way we use the iPads and make it so we don't use them so much because they don't help you learn too much.” (Primary school student, NZ European)

“Have no uniform, and use more technology rather than book work.” (Secondary school student, Māori/NZ European)

Make school times work for us

Some children and young people talked about the timing of the school day, and when they learn most effectively:

“If I could I would make school start at 10:00 am so people get proper sleep and are ready for school and I'd also make the weekends have three days instead of two.” (Primary school student, Ethiopian/Eritrean)

"To start school at 8.30 and finish at 2.30." (Primary school student, Pacific People)

Achievement is more than getting good marks

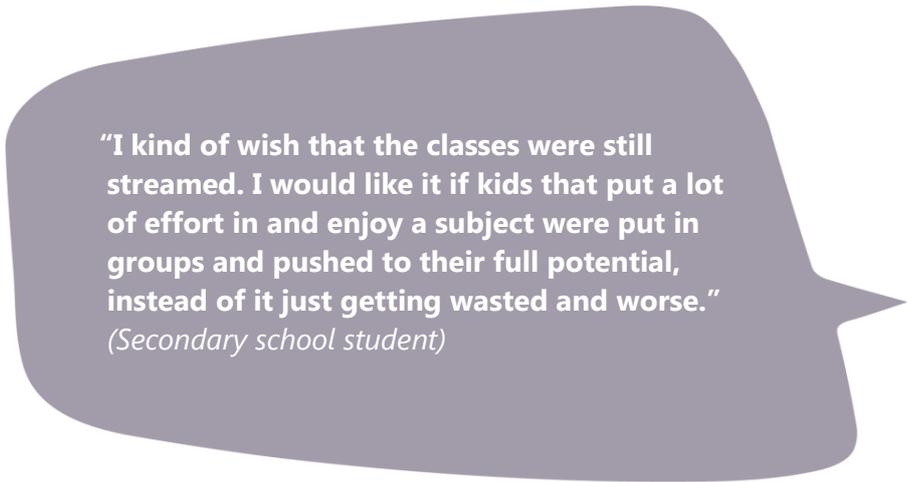
Some young people told us that the attitudes and behaviour of classmates who are less engaged can become a barrier to learning for others in the class.

A lot of children and young people talked about the place of sports and P.E. or fitness in their school.

"I would change the amount of emphasis our school has on sport and make it equal to academics. For example currently we only ever hear about sporting achievements and not academic achievements." (Secondary school student, New Zealander)

"Appreciate the cultural groups more, our Kapa Haka group and Poly group have been hiding behind sport achievements. I think that everyone should be appreciated for what they achieve. I would also make sure no teacher picks favourite and puts down the ones who they do not like as it happens way too often." (Secondary school student, Asian)

"I would be more inclusive for people that want to do sport as a career." (Secondary school student, NZ European)



"I kind of wish that the classes were still streamed. I would like it if kids that put a lot of effort in and enjoy a subject were put in groups and pushed to their full potential, instead of it just getting wasted and worse." (Secondary school student)

My friends are my go-to⁵

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 the support of at least one person in their peer group and a trusting relationship with their teacher.

Having friends keeps me going

We asked children and young people about what motivates them to go to school, and we found that, for many young people, friendships with peers are what keep them going to school. Almost 1/3 of the children and young people who responded to our survey listed being with friends as one of the most important factors about school (primary), or that motivates them to be at school (secondary). This puts contact with friends on a par with academic achievement and learning new things as a motivating factor keeping children and young people in school.

“School's not really the right place for me. Hard for me to make friends.”
(*Secondary school student, Asian*)

For many children and young people, school can be a lonely and scary place.

“Honestly from my perspective being new at [this school] has been the worse experience of all my schooling years. None of the ... students have ever been accepting to the new people and if they are its only because those new people “fit in” within groups. So I think maybe getting a new student paired up with a student who isn't new so that it would be easier to make friends...” (*Secondary school student, Pacific People*)

“My mum and teacher help me make friends when I first started school because mum asked the teacher if there was someone scared like me and that's when she said there was a kid called A... and we are still friends up till today.” (*Primary school student, Māori/Japanese*)

“I'd make sure everyone had a friend to be with throughout the day because being alone makes you sad sometimes.” (*Secondary school student, NZ European*)

⁵ This finding is discussed further in the following report: *Education matters to me: Emotional wellbeing*

"If I had made more friends and be included." (*Intermediate school student, Pacific People*)

Whānau is important for my learning

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.

"My family made me happy by giving me everything i want and supported but also my friends helped me along the way, so yea." (*Primary school student, Māori/ NZ European/Pacific People*)

"Getting my parents involved with my learning and helping me at school." (*Primary school student, NZ European*)

"Better relationships between teacher, parents and children." (*Secondary school student, Samoan*)

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*)

I do well when I feel cared for

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, 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 a disability 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.

"At first, I felt unhappy to be put in a class that had none of my friends in. as I got used to the class, I made more friends and I was happy in the class I was put in. But if I could've changed anything I would've liked to be put in a class where I knew someone well, so I would feel comfortable starting the year off." *(Intermediate school student, Asian)*

"When I started intermediate there was basically a big group of the "cool kids" and they were not very friendly and if ur not part of the "cool kids" u don't really have that many friends and u basically just hang out in small group of people so I just think everyone need to give everyone else a chance cause you could become good friends but it's hard they make friends when ur not "cool enough" and when people don't try to include you." *(Intermediate school student, NZ European)*

Respect me, treat me as an equal⁶

Children and young people talked about the lack of choice or participation in decision making. 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.

Support me to have a say

They highlighted the importance of recognising children and young people as equals, who have a right to participate in decisions that affect them. Children and young people wanted to have a say in their education. They wanted teachers to involve them in their learning.

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

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. These rangatahi become disengaged from mainstream education not through lack of interest in school, but because teachers do not communicate effectively with them.

“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*)

“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*)

Let us decide what our uniforms are

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, 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.

⁶ This finding is discussed further in the following reports: *Education matters to me: Emotional wellbeing* and *Education matters to me: Progress and achievement*

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.

"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)*

"Uniform. Its way to limiting and makes it harder to express ourselves." *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

"I would do away with uniform COMPLETELY!!! Uniform is a useless part of school; it has no bearing over our learning, and does nothing to improve any part of school life in any way. It is also ridiculously expensive (so much for free education)." *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

We heard that some young people don't feel comfortable in their uniform.

"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)*

"Change the uniform to uni-sex, or have a uni-sex choice" *(Secondary school student)*

For some, they were in alternative education, but still having to wear their school uniform. That felt wrong. The young people talked about how they knew their school didn't want them, but it still got money for them, and that's why they still had to wear the uniform. Other young people used their uniform to talk about feeling like they had restricted freedoms and a lack of choices, and how that made them feel disconnected. The young people want a reason to go to school, and important in that is having choices, variety and being supported to be who they are. To them, the uniform is symbolic of a lack of all three of those things.

We also heard that some young people feel that school is failing to acknowledge that they have their own sexual and gender identity. They want recognition of who they are and better and more timely information about sex, sexuality and sexual relationships⁷:

“A better sex ed program. In year 9 we did one period of health for half a year. Most of the time we did some weird friends booklet thing and only 2 periods on actual sex ed. It's important for teenagers to be learning about sex correctly and in a safe manner. Being a co-ed school a lot of students have sex, but the poor health program doesn't give them the correct learning about what they're doing.” (Secondary school student, NZ European)

“Better sex education including consent, all the types of contraception, and different sexualities.” (Secondary school student, NZ European)

“I want our school to be more understanding about LGBT+ people, give us a unisex uniform.” (Secondary school student, NZ European)

Understand our needs

We heard that schools do not always seem able to accept that young people who are still at school may be facing other challenges such as mental health, suicide or sexual abuse. When these difficult realities are not acknowledged, and schools cannot model appropriate strategies to discuss and manage them constructively, young people may become sceptical about their school's relevance or ability to engage on issues that matter.

“Understanding students needs especially mental issues as this is not clear to older teachers which causes students to detach themselves from the subject due to them thinking that the teacher does not understand them and believing that school is pointless. We spend a majority of our time at school, it should feel like a second home and not a prison.” (Secondary school student, NZ European)

“Make the teachers aware, respectful and non judgemental about mental health, learning disabilities and LGBT+ students and teachers or families. Help students who do come to class high or who look upset. Sex education. Allow suicide and sexual abuse to be discussed within year groups by teachers or students in speeches.” (Secondary school student, NZ European)

“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)

⁷ *Sexuality education: a guide for principals, boards of trustees, and teachers* was published in 2015. It is available from the TKI website www.health.tki.org.nz

Recognise my potential, and give me hope⁸

A lot of children and young people see the opportunities that school offers them. They shared a range of things that motivate them to be at school, and help to engage them.

“Doing cultural activities, e.g. music, drama, kapa haka.” (Secondary school student, NZ European)

“Spending time with friends.” (Secondary school student, Māori/NZ European)

“Learning.” (Primary school student, Māori/Pacific People)

“Achieving academically.” (Secondary school student, Māori, Pacific People)

“I’m not motivated to be at school, but I have to be here.” (Secondary school student, NZ European)

“When we do fun activities.” (Primary school student, Pacific People)

“School motivates me to work hard as I want to do well to travel overseas playing hockey.” (Secondary school student, NZ European)

“I would play games and do lots of learning like we normally do because kids need education.” (Primary school student, Māori/Scottish)

In teen parent units young mums talked about the honours wall. The honours wall celebrates the successes of previous students at the unit. It has photos of graduates with their degrees, or information about their employment and things that they have achieved. These young people talked about how that wall gives them hope for their future, and shows them what they can achieve.

My children are my biggest motivation

We heard from mothers in teen parent units that their children were their biggest motivation for achieving. They felt that when their school environment supports them to support their children then it supports them to achieve.

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

⁸ This finding is discussed further in the following reports: *Education matters to me: Emotional wellbeing* and *Education matters to me: Progress and achievement*

“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)

My whānau motivate me

For some rangatahi and tamariki Māori, they talked about the low expectations that others had for them because they are Māori. They also told us that whānau play a big part for many rangatahi in motivating them to do well in school.

“I want to achieve for myself but also for my family.” (Student in secondary school, Māori)

[What helps you achieve at school?] **“Supporting my whānau, iwi and hapū any way I can and have a successful career.”** (Student in kura kaupapa, Māori)

We heard from rangatahi who are motivated to be the first in their whānau to pass and finish school. It was a big motivating factor and also could be a constant struggle.

“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)

“I hope, one day, I’m going to say ‘I stayed in school for 13 years, through all the blood, sweat and tears.’” (Student in kura kaupapa, Māori)

“What keeps me going to school is just the fact that none of my family have fully finished school, and I don’t want to be one of them so I’m making that my goal, to finish school with all my levels next year for my last year.” (Student in secondary school, Māori)

Conclusion

Children and young people told us about a wide range of factors that keep them engaged with school, such as feeling that their teachers know and respect them, understand the way they learn, emphasise their strengths and share high hopes for their future. The support of friends and whānau is also important. When this is absent, it is easier for children and young people to disengage.

We heard about how children and young people want their teachers to know what is happening for them at home, and to take that into account. We also heard that children and young people want to be taught according to their unique skills and abilities.

We also heard that for some children and young people who are most in need of the support and encouragement that school can provide, school can appear irrelevant and out of touch when the uncomfortable realities they are dealing with are trivialised or ignored. For these children and young people, education still matters, and still offers the promise of a better future. We heard that, when teachers and other adults do not communicate effectively or engage with children and young people in a way that recognises and meets their individual strengths and needs, it can feel as if that promise is being withheld.

Our schools need to provide a good education for all of the children and young people of Aotearoa New Zealand. We heard from children and young people that the system is currently falling short. The question is how can we make it better.

If we really want to improve education outcomes, we need to get input from the people it affects most directly – children and young people. The children and young people we engaged with in the preparation of these reports care deeply about their education and how it prepares them for their future lives. They have a great sense of hope for what education can offer them.

Children and young people are experts on their own experiences in education. Only they can talk about whether the kind of experience we are trying to give our children and young people is what they are actually getting. They have the right to have a say, and have their views heard in decisions that affect them. It is time for everyone, especially in education, to be more deliberate and purposeful in how we incorporate children's views and opinions when making decisions that affect them.

We have gathered a diverse range of perspectives from children and young people throughout New Zealand, but we recognise the limitations of our reach. In particular voices from those children and young people living rurally are not captured in this report. The children and young people's voices that have shaped this report, and all of the *Education matters to me* reports, are honest and genuine. It is our job now to listen to them and act on what we hear.

Education matters to me: Listen to the voices of children and young people.

A starting point for the Statement of National Education Learning Priorities.

Six key insights drawn from our engagement with children and young people on education, and supported by the findings in this report. These key insights are explored further in our Education matters to me: Key insights report.



Understand me in my whole world

He kākano ahau i te wao nui tāngata

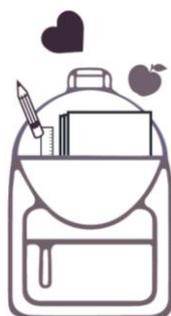
Children and young people talked about how they want to be seen for who they are, and to be understood within the context of their home life, and experiences.



Relationships mean everything to me

He āhuru mowāi, he ingo matauranga

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



I need to be comfortable before I can learn

Whangaia tēnei manu kai matauranga

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.



People at school are racist towards me

He mea nui te hononga tangata

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



Teach me the way I learn best

Whangaia tēnei manu kai matauranga

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



It's my life - let me have a say

Whakatua toku rangatiratanga

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. They want teachers to involve them in their learning.

"Another thing I would like is for a way to connect with teachers more, most teachers are there to teach and want nothing to do with the students, but being [with] a teacher who you get along with and like their students is a lot better for the kids, and could make teaching easier for the teacher." *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

"I was the guy that could not say stuff it was super hard. I did not like changing school I was the guy that was lonely sometimes. Then I found friends." *(Primary school student, NZ European)*

“Uniform. Why is it needed? It's so unnecessary I feel like we would actually learn better in the comfort of our own clothes (as long as appropriate)” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

“ ... sometimes i dont want to come to school cause i want a break but i have to for my future job. i have to learn i also have to get a academic and so forth.” *(Secondary school student, Asian)*

“I would make it compulsory for teachers to learn about mental health as 80% of the teachers I have could give a rat's ass 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 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).*



MANAAKITIA A TĀTOU TAMARIKI

**Children's
Commissioner**

