



MANAAKITIA A TĀTOU TAMARIKI

**Children's
Commissioner**

“My mum...asked the teacher if there was someone scared like me and that’s when she said there was a kid called [...] and we are still friends up till today.” *(Primary school student, Māori/Japanese)*

Education matters to me: Emotional wellbeing

Detailed report 2 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: Emotional wellbeing**,
and a link to the online version at www.occ.org.nz or www.nzsta.org.nz

ISBN: 978-0-473-43297-3

Education matters to me:

Emotional wellbeing

Detailed Report 2 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 following 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**

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>

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 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.

Emotional wellbeing is the area of enquiry explored in this report.

Glossary

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

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

What did we find out about emotional wellbeing?

We know that when children and young people are happy, and feel like they belong, they learn better.

We wanted to hear from tamariki and rangatahi about their experiences of their education. To do this, we asked questions along the themes of:

Do you enjoy [learning centre]?

What makes you happy here?

What makes you sad here?

What could be better?

Do you feel as though you belong?

Did you feel that way at school? Why?

What could have been better?

What made you feel that way?

Relationships matter

“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)*

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.

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

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

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

The responses we gathered from children and young people have been grouped into nine findings:

- Finding 1** My friends are my go-to
- Finding 2** I need my teacher to respect me
- Finding 3** I need my teacher to recognise I have a disability that affects the way I learn best
- Finding 4** My physical space impacts on my learning
- Finding 5** I want to be comfortable in what I wear
- Finding 6** How I'm feeling impacts how I'm learning
- Finding 7** When bullying happens, I need to know you'll deal with it and I'll be kept safe
- Finding 8** My social needs - preparing and sharing kai
- Finding 9** Accept me

This report further explores these nine key findings on emotional wellbeing.

"I would change everyone's perspective over Pasifika students. I feel like most teachers don't particularly think that we islanders are good enough really, from the way they convey to teach." (Secondary school student, Pacific Peoples)

"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)

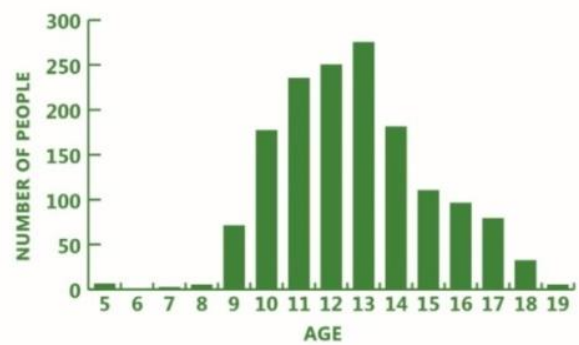
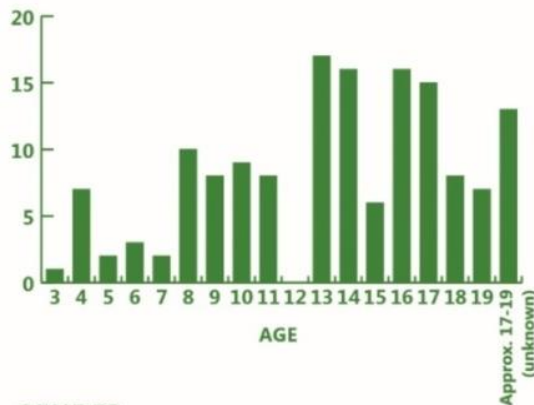
Who did we talk with?

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.

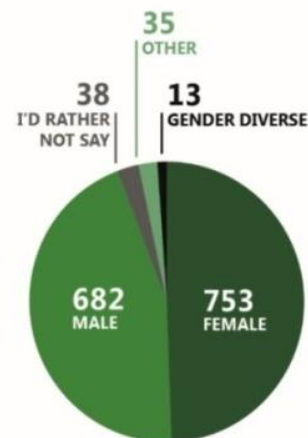
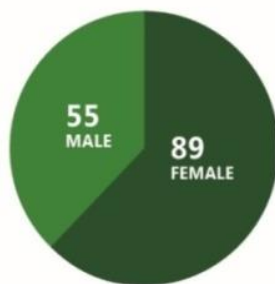
144 Face to face engagements
Kanohi ki te kanohi

1534 Online responses
Urupare ā-ipurangi

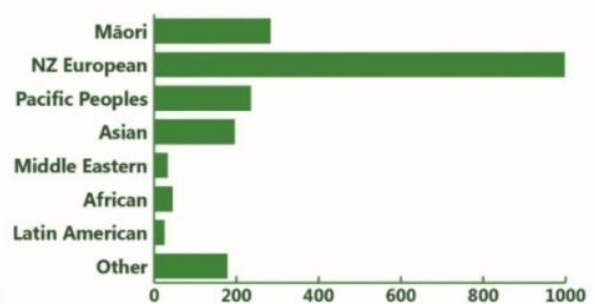
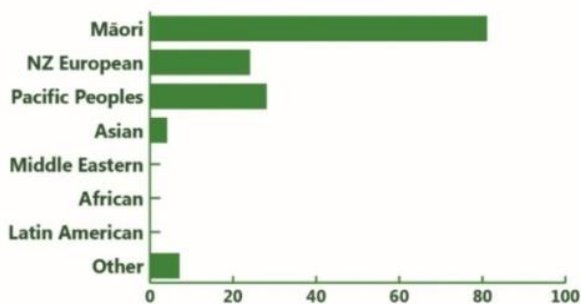
AGE



GENDER



ETHNICITY



My friends are my go-to²

Children and young people stressed the importance of supportive peer relationships in their learning environment. Having contact with friends was a key motivating factor for children and young people responding to the survey, alongside academic achievement and learning new things.

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

Children and young people from a range of ages and education settings identified friendships as one of the most important factors about their school life.

“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)*

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

Many children and young people talked about how school has been a lonely or scary place for them at times.

“Honestly from my perspective being new at [this school] has been the worse experience of all my schooling years. 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 Peoples)*

“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)*

“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)*

“If I had made more friends and be included.” *(Intermediate school student, Pacific Peoples)*

² This finding is also discussed further in the following report: *Education matters to me: Engagement*

“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.” *(Intermediate school student, NZ European)*

Their place within their whānau, hapū, or family is also integral to children and young people’s learning journey. Some children and young people told us that the way their families and communities view education can 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.” *(Primary school student, Māori/NZ European/Pacific Peoples)*

“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)*

Children and young people said that the peer support that their friends provide, along with family support and teachers who care are crucial to staying engaged in their school or course work. When they feel alone and without role models, find their teachers annoying, or have no social connections, they are more likely to become disengaged from school.

[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)*

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 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 me³

The quality of the relationships children and young people have with their teachers is extremely important. Having a strong relationship means the teacher gets to know them as an individual, but tamariki and rangatahi also stressed to us 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.”

Some of the children and young people who responded to our survey told us that they can feel as if they are not treated with respect or compassion by their teachers, or that they are blamed for things that are not their fault. Some of them told us that their teachers do not listen or try to understand them:

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

“I would also change some of the teachers as some are rude and have little respect for the students.” (*Secondary school student, Asian/Latin American*)

Some young people told us about feeling that most of their teachers do not care about them, or actively dislike them:

“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*)


“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.” (*Secondary school student, NZ European*)

“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*)

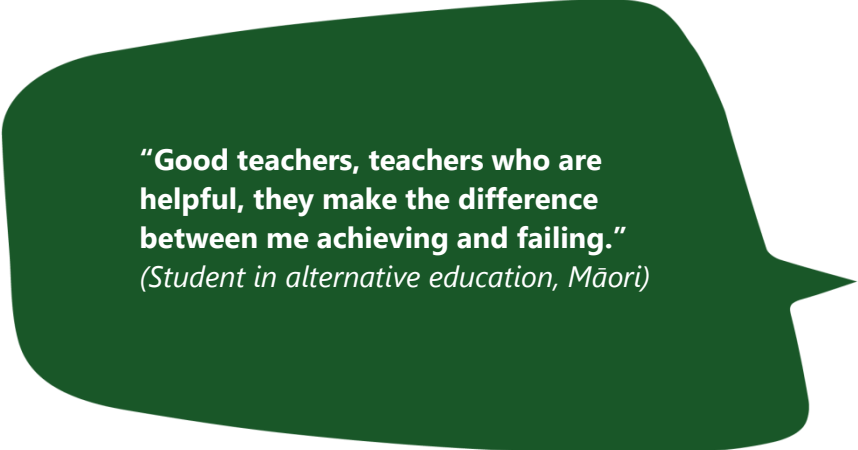
³ This finding is also discussed further in the following reports: *Education matters to me: Progress and achievement* and *Education matters to me: Engagement*

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 that comes 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.



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



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

I need my teacher to recognise I have a disability that affects the way I learn best⁴

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)*

We talked to children and young people with a range of learning difficulties, including those with identified disabilities. We encourage further exploration to hear the voices of children and young people who experience learning difficulties, and to establish the extent to which learning difficulties are being recognised early and responded to. A number of the young people with whom we spoke may have had their educational success compromised by unrecognised learning and developmental needs.

“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)

⁴ This finding is also discussed further in the report: *Education matters to me: Engagement*

My physical space impacts on my learning⁵

Many of the children and young people we engaged with told us about how their physical environment affects their learning. Some feel invisible in large, open-plan learning spaces, and have difficulty connecting with their teachers. For other children, the school playground is a space where bad things can happen away from teachers' oversight:

"Bully free zone. So you can go to another playground and you cannot get bullied." (Primary school student, Māori)

"More teachers on duty to make sure students don't feel unwanted in the playground." (Primary school student, NZ European)

Buildings and equipment that are uncomfortable or easy to use were also identified as limitations to children and young people's school experience.

"Class rooms need to be able to fit to the weather - therefore heaters need to be on when it's freezing and raining, and air conditioning needs to be on when it's boiling hot and everyone is sweating - it's when you feel gross because of weather it's very difficult to focus in class. I understand this is a lot and money can be an issue but if anything can be done to improve our learning and health at school it would be something many students would be grateful for." (Secondary school student, NZ European)

"Another thing is that in the winter some classes have no heating as the school doesn't want overload the circuit or something like that. This is basic health, I could see my breath in class and was wearing a puffer jacket." (Secondary school student, NZ European)

"Upgrade the 1800s era computers in the music block bc they don't work 97% of the time." (Secondary school student, Māori, NZ European)

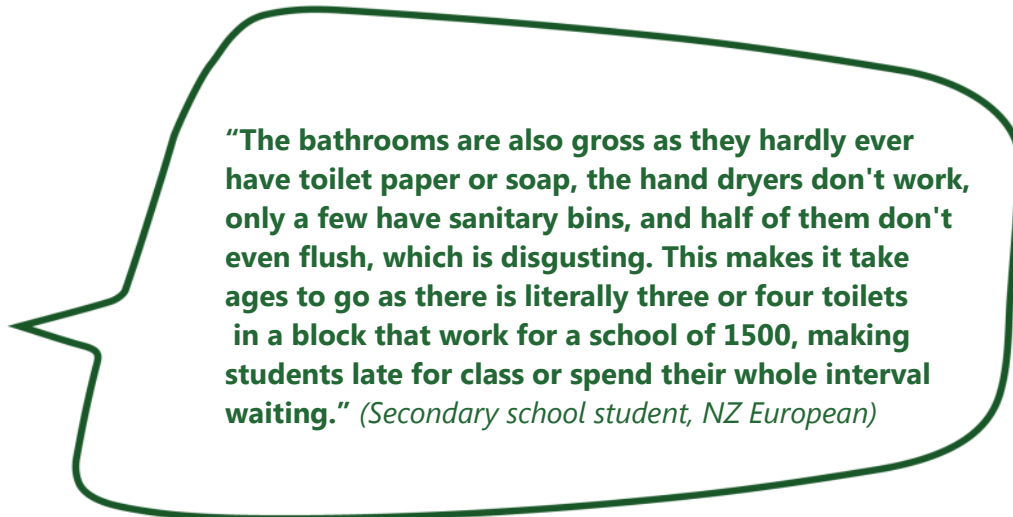
"The places that the staircases are in, get a better map, FIX THE GYMS, the fact that the music block LEAKS, the wifi, etc etc etc etc." (Secondary school student, NZ European)

⁵ This finding is also discussed further in the following reports: *Education matters to me: Progress and achievement*, *Education matters to me: Transitions* and *Education matters to me: If I were the boss - Improving our education*.

Others that we spoke to were more affected by the physical environment, such as spaces that didn't feel clean and inviting, and particularly unpleasant and unhygienic conditions in the school toilets:

"I would make the facilities cleaner, and some of the classrooms less like 1950s prison." (Secondary school student, NZ European)

"I would change the entire school by putting in more rubbish bins so our school won't look dirty that much!!!" (Primary school student, Pacific Peoples)



"Clean working student bathrooms - hand dryers should work, toilets should flush, we should have toilet paper, there should be soap, the doors should lock, sanitary bins should not be over flowing." (Secondary school student, NZ European)

"This school is filled to the brim with indecencies for example, in the Restrooms the walls have been drawn on with content unsuitable for a school." (Secondary school student, Asian)

"Make a door at the changing room... clean toilet everyday." (Primary school student, Asian)

"The [bathrooms] are actually revolting but it's cause lots of the students vandalise them so I would want new bathrooms and consequences if u muck them up." (Intermediate school student, NZ European)

Survey respondents talked about a need for gender neutral bathrooms:

"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)

I want to be comfortable in what I wear⁶

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 consider their school uniform to be unfashionable or impractical.

Of the survey respondents who replied to an open ended 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)*

Some told us it felt wrong to be required to wear a uniform in an alternative education setting. Some students attending alternative education settings and teen parent units are still required to wear the uniform of their last school. These students talked about being sure their school doesn't want them; 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.

“Uniform. Its way to limiting and makes it harder to express ourselves.” *(Secondary 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)*

“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)*

⁶ This finding is also discussed further in the following report: *He manu kai matauranga: He tirohanga Māori and Education matters to me: Transitions.*

"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)*


One primary-school respondent to our survey commented on the financial stress that school requirements can cause:

"Maybe lower the prices for uniform and stationery and maybe fees because stuff at home might not be going well." *(Primary school student, Pacific Peoples)*

We also heard from many young people how it can be hard to learn at school when they are constantly in trouble for not having the right uniform. These rangatahi spoke of how their teachers could only focus on what they were or were not wearing. Rangatahi wanted their teachers to focus on teaching them not on what their uniforms looked like.

"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)*

"Schools should make uniforms simpler, cheaper and comfortable and help families who can't afford them." *(Secondary school student, Māori)*



"If you're trying to make a significant difference to the school, changing the socks is literally the last thing on the list of problems this school has." *(Secondary school student, Māori/NZ European)*

How I'm feeling impacts how I'm learning⁷

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. Some children told us they do not feel safe and supported at school.

"I hate school most of the time I don't feel safe at school I'd rather be home schooled." (*Intermediate school student, Māori/Pacific Peoples/Greek*)

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 could 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*)

⁷ This finding is also discussed further in the following reports: *Education matters to me: Engagement*, *Education matters to me: Progress and achievement* and *Education matters to me: If I were the boss - improving our education*

Young people especially told us that good pastoral care in school makes a huge difference, but many of them do not have access to enough school counsellors or staff who have been adequately trained to provide effective pastoral care.

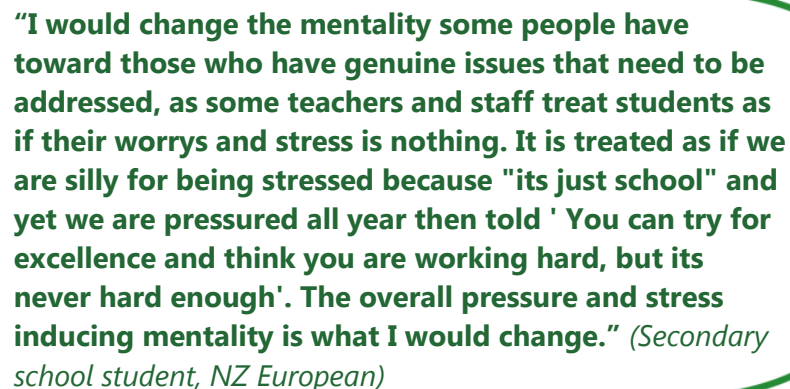
“I would like our school to put more effort into recognizing mental and emotional issues that some students have, our school seems to only want our attendance to look good. Mental health isn't something our school focuses much on, which isn't good considering how much changes teenagers go through.” *(Secondary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

“It needs to be recognised that students do get stressed and more needs to be done to ensure that they are taking care of their mental health - so students need to be taught ways how and teachers need to understand this and therefore not get mad at us for having a moment to breath to ensure we don't have a break down in class [when] we've been a consistently hard working student for the rest of the year - also learn ways to deal with stress and the teachers find ways to lessen the amount of stress placed on students - the teachers should understand this as they also get stressed themselves.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

“I would suggest immediately hire qualified, experienced councillors (1 councillor - 20 students) to teach students about copeing mechanisms, depression, and what to do to be a mentally healthy person. I would also have mandatory weekly support group meetings with the councillor.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

“More education for teachers on how to deal with students and depression.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

“Improved health education and counselling opportunities.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European/German)*



“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 "its just school" and yet we are pressured all year then told ' You can try for excellence and think you are working hard, but its never hard enough'. The overall pressure and stress inducing mentality is what I would change.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

Several young people talked about suicide. Some expressed concern that their school is not well enough prepared to recognise warning signs and respond appropriately, suggesting that it is not important enough to the people who make decisions about funding or resourcing. Sometimes these comments were made in the context of bullying, but other times the context was adolescent mental health or coping with stress. The students who talked to us about suicide saw it as an issue that directly affected them and their peers, not just a remote and occasional thing that happens to other people.

“Having messages in the bathroom like kill myself not come up.” *(Secondary school student, multiple ethnicities)*

“The amount of knowledge they have with suicide. What drives people to attempt or commit. To help them with depression and to reach out to the people who are going through rough times because sometimes it's hard for them to reach out to you.” *(Secondary school student, Asian)*

“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)*

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.

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)*

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

Children and young people told us it's important to realise that they have lives outside of school. For many of the children and young people we heard from, home is a safe place, with access to the support of family and friends. For some children and young people this is not the case and they need extra support from their friends and their school.

“... help [for] people who have problems at home.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

One young person was already considering the risk of becoming homeless:

“Knowing that if I don't try I'll be homeless in a few years.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European/Pacific Peoples)*

For the young people in teen parent units, and other young people facing pregnancy or early parenthood there are some specific challenges that they need their school to understand. Young people in teen parent units talked about how supportive it was to have teachers who knew they had been up all night with their child, and so let them rest before starting their school work. These young people appreciated how their teachers adapted their schedule to suit their needs on any given day.

“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)*

“Reduce stress levels? Why do you think we have such a high youth suicide rate? I'm in a situation where if I fail my exam I cannot get a career in science, therefore having nothing to do when I leave school, fix this, it's absolutely ridiculous.” *(Secondary school student, Māori/NZ European)*

When bullying happens, I need to know you'll deal with it and I will be kept safe⁸

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 when they talk to a teacher about bullying and responded to appropriately. 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 remain 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

⁸ This finding is also discussed further in the following reports: *Education matters to me: Progress and achievement*, *Education matters to me: Experiences of tamariki and rangatahi Maori* and *Education matters to me: If I were the boss - Improving our education*.

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)*

Participants of one of the focus groups were more dismissive when the topic of bullying was raised. For some of the young people, especially those who have grown up where domestic violence, swearing and aggressive behaviour is normal. When this behaviour that was identified in school as bullying, this group thought the actions were 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))*

My social needs: Preparing and sharing kai⁹

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 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.

“I’m always hungry. It’s shame as to say you don’t have kai so I just act full. The kids can would be g but you have to sign up and everybody knows. So nah.” *(Student in alternative education, Māori)*

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.

“We can eat lunch together at TPU. 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)*

Some survey respondents said free food and a welcome would have helped them settle into a new school better.

“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)*

Others said, if they could change anything, they’d have cheaper canteen food and/or better quality canteen food.

“Healthy food at the canteen! I’ve always idolised the French canteen system and investing in good quality food would improve student’s learning and parents could guarantee their kids are eating well at least once a day. This could be achieved through a tax or a school fee, and students that couldn’t afford the meals could apply to have it subsidised without others

⁹ This finding is also discussed further in the report: He manu kai matauranga: He tirohanga Māori

judging. Having healthy meals dished to students could greatly improve health issues in the country and set up good eating habits". (Secondary school student, NZ European)

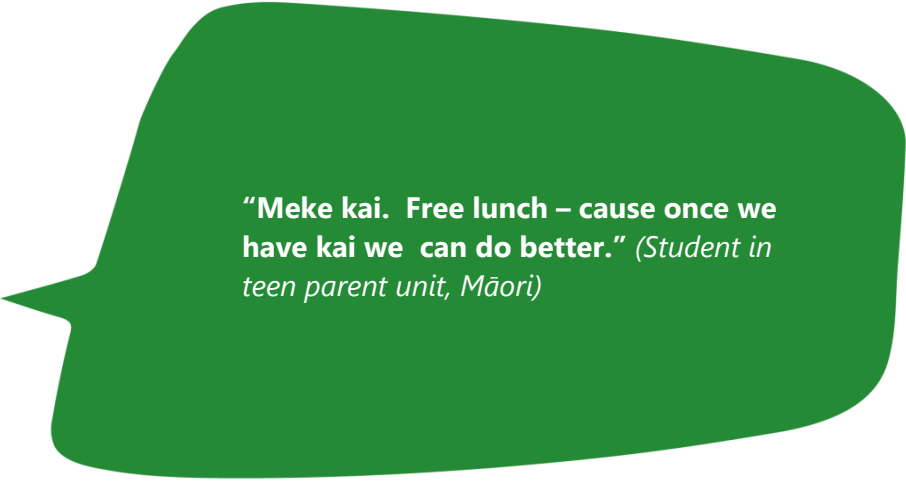
"CHEAPER FOOD AT THE CANTEEN." (Secondary school student, English)

"I would put more healthy food options." (Primary school student, NZ European/Scottish)

"Free food." (Secondary school student, Pacific Peoples)

"Everyone would get free food." (Secondary school student, NZ European)

"Better food from canteen." (Secondary school student, New Zealand European/Asian)



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

Accept me¹⁰

Young people told us that their school needs to be more responsive to gender, sexuality and racism.

Some children and young people talked about how difficult it can be for them or their classmates who are LGBTQ+ or different ethnicities.

“I would want LGBTQ to be more accepted, i get gay jokes a lot and next to nobody knows I am so it makes me wonder how many students get hurt by these comments.” *(Secondary student, Māori/NZ European)*

“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.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European/Middle Eastern)*

“Make any gender of student be able to wear any pieces of the uniform... Better sex education including consent, all the types of contraception, and different sexualities.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

“The sexist comments.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

“Eliminate rape culture and toxic masculinity.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

“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)*

One young person who responded to our survey suggested;

“That we would also talk and have a day to celebrate people’s religions and not just the LGBT community.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

While most children and young people were supportive of their LGBTQ+ peers, one student responding to our survey said

“Not give any people special treatment because they are "gender diverse"/mentally ill. Also refer them to counselling as they clearly need

¹⁰ This finding is also discussed further in the following reports: *Education matters to me: Progress and achievement*, *Education matters to me: Engagement and He manu kai matauranga: he tirohanga Māori*

help with attention seeking problems.” *(Secondary school student, NZ European)*

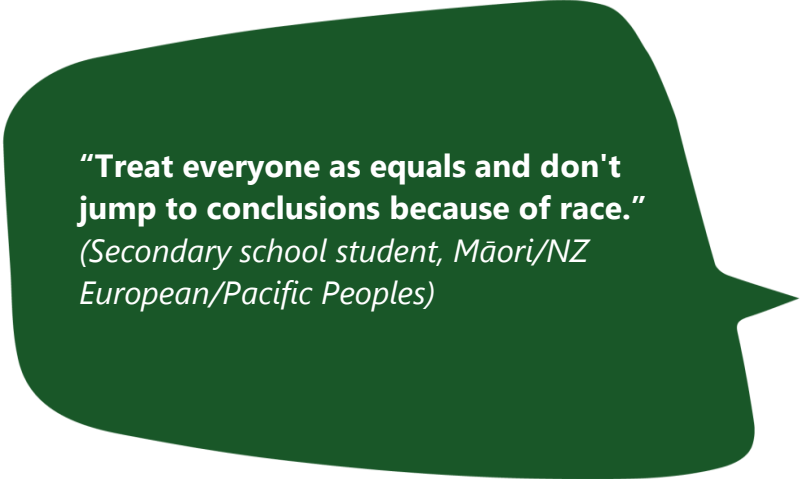
Many of the children and young people we heard from described their experience of attitudes and behaviours based on their race. While some of the racist behaviour appeared to be linked to bullying behaviour from other students, we also heard that teachers often make assumptions or respond differently to students from ethnic or cultural backgrounds different from their own.

“I would change everyone’s perspective over Pasifka students. I feel like most teachers don’t particular think that we islanders are good enough really, from the way they convey to teach.” *(Secondary school student, Pacific Peoples)*

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

“Less racism.” *(Primary school student, Asian/Middle Eastern)*

“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, Māori/New Zealand European/Pacific Peoples)*



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

Conclusion

Children and young people we engaged with told us about a wide range of factors, from wanting their teachers and peers to know them, and emphasise their strengths and the way they learn, to wanting to be respected and have teachers and their families share high hopes for their future.

Having great relationships with teachers, friends, and their school community plays a significant role in children and young people's engagement, as does feeling that school is a welcoming and inviting place to be. When any of these parts are absent, it is easier for children and young people to become disengaged.

We heard about how children and young people want their teachers to know what is happening for them at home, and to make allowances for that. We also heard that children and young people want to be taught according to their unique skills and abilities. They know how important their friends are. They want to be respected, and treated as an equal, and want to be accepted regardless of their gender, sexuality or race. Many of these things culminate for young people the hopes that others have for them, and what they think they are capable of achieving.

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: Key insights.

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 can be found in our report Education matters to me: Key insights



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 mowai, 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 their futures.



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.



“I would like our school to put more effort into recognising 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)



MANAAKITIA A TĀTOU TAMARIKI
**Children's
Commissioner**

