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OUR VOICES

School Experiences
Overcoming Challenges

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AIM: *To identify what makes school easy or tough using youth voice data collected via* Tō Mātou Rerenga - Our Journey *app.*

KEY INSIGHTS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

- **Not fitting in among peers is seen as a risk factor for experiencing bullying.**
- **Young people face many challenges in and out of school.**
- **Rangatahi have ideas about how to make school a more inclusive place but want the support of school staff and leadership to promote change.**

What do we know?

School engagement promotes positive outcomes (e.g., achievement) and reduces negative outcomes (e.g., dropping out of school)[1]. Concerningly, rates of school engagement amongst students are decreasing in Aotearoa[2]. This is particularly apparent during the adolescent period, when young people experience lower levels of school engagement[1,3]. Previous studies of youth voice have highlighted the importance of relationships and connection in making school an enjoyable and effective place to learn and grow[4,5].

What can we learn?

Qualitative studies of school engagement often focus on the lived experiences of individuals[5], particularly those who are identified as being at-risk of disengaging from school[4]. The Our Voices study was interested in the perspectives of all young people, asking for their views on the groups of people who had it easy or tough at their school, why this was, and what could be done about it. Encouraging young people to reflect on the wider school context can offer new insights into the challenges faced by different groups of students and what can be done to minimise barriers to learning.

WHAT MAKES SCHOOL EASY OR TOUGH?

'Fitting in' is seen as important

Young people observed that if you don't fit in at school you stand out and become a target for bullying. Having 'unique' traits or characteristics that make you different from the 'norm' often resulted in experiences of bullying.

Young people reported that students who are neuro-diverse, disabled, LGBTQ+, without friends or part of a minority group are more likely to stand out and not fit in.

"They get bullied 24/7."

"Other kids pick on them because of their differences."

"They stand out and sometimes get laughed at."

"Different people are an easy target for people."

"Society has a tendency to hate what is different."

"Students are literally dying because of bullying, and schools do nothing about it."

Friends are protective

Rangatahi told us that the presence of friends is protective against bullying for two reasons:
1) friends can stand up to bullies, and
2) having friends means that you are less likely to stand out from the crowd.

However, this also indicates that not having friends may mean that students are more likely to experience bullying.

Which groups of students do you feel have an easy time at your school?

"The ones that have a good group of friends they can trust."

"People with a lot of friends or even with a small group of friends."

"The people who stick in groups."

"Those in stable friendship groups."

Taking action

Young people suggested different ways to prevent bullying at school, including more effective anti-bullying programmes, teacher intervention and clearer disciplinary action. These suggestions have a strong focus on school systems and processes as the centrepiece of creating an inclusive school culture.

How could your school better support those who have it tough?

"Advertise diversity."

"By improving the system to address bullying issues."

"By creating a space for people to meet new people."

"Listen without judgement."

"By having a better behaviour management system."

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The responses demonstrated that there is no universal experience of school

Responses emphasised the individual differences of both students and schools – everyone has fluctuations in feelings and experiences over time. Most young people recognised that no one is going to have an easy time at school all of the time and noted a range of challenges that may be navigated by students.

Some of the challenges navigated by young people included:

SOCIAL ISOLATION, BULLYING, SOCIAL MEDIA, PEER PRESSURE, IGNORANCE, HATRED, HOME LIFE, ADJUSTING TO A NEW LANGUAGE AND CULTURE, BEING SHY, LEARNING DISABILITIES, SCHOOLWORK, MENTAL HEALTH, ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE, FAMILY ISSUES, RACISM, STREAMING, AND THE SCHOOL SYSTEM ITSELF.

"Having no friends can mean you get lonely, being bullied can mean you feel sad and unsafe, being unable to stay on task can mean you could have a hard time with your teachers."

Which groups of students do you feel have a tough time at your school?
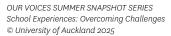
Specific groups of students were consistently identified by rangatahi as having a tough time at school. Interestingly, 8% of responses stated that no one 'had it tough' at school. This likely reflects that we are only able to speak to issues and experiences that we have been exposed to.

CATEGORY	(Dis)ability	Personality & interests	Identity	Attitudes & behaviours	Social	Health & appearance	Home	No one	I don't know
EXAMPLE	Neuro-diverse kids; Those in lower streams	Introverts; Unathletic kids; Goofy personality	LGBTQ+; The international students	The naughty ones; People who don't try	Ones that are left out; People that get bullied	Sad ones; Ginger kids; Anxious kids	Poorer students; Kids with tough home lives	No groups; None	IDK; Not sure

Those who have it tough are the opposite of those who have it easy

Most young people had a clear idea about what groups of students had it easy or tough at their school. Young people would often report those who had it tough as being the oppsite of those who had it easy.

Groups that reportedly have a tough time	*Groups that reportedly have an easy time*
The weird ones	The normal ones
None	All of them
People with learning disabiilities	Smart students
The friendless	All who have friends
The quiet ones	The loud ones

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How can schools improve the student experience?

Young people identified a range of measures that schools can take to make school a positive and inclusive environment for everyone.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS
WELLBEING SURVEYS
MENTAL HEALTH CHECK-UPS
ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT
TALK TO FAMILIES
SAFE SPACES
CLUBS
SMALLER CLASS SIZES
YOUTH WORKERS
COUNSELLORS
SOCIAL SKILLS CLASSES
TEACHER AIDES
CHECK-INS AT FORM TIME
THERAPY
HARSHER PUNISHMENTS
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS
USE CORRECT PRONOUNS
ANTIBULLYING INITIATIVES
GET RID OF STREAMING

Word size not indicative of response frequency

Although some suggestions were related to learning and achievement, most were directed towards improving the classroom climate and wider school environment.
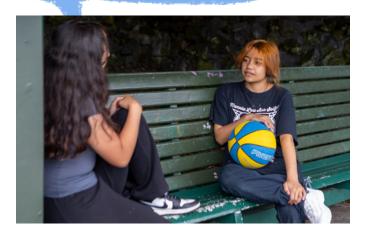
This indicates that school is perceived as a site of holistic growth and development rather than having a singular focus on academics.

Young people want to help make school better

Young people feel that their voices are not important or do not have the power to initiate change. However, they recognise both the power and responsibility of school staff and leadership to help address the challenges that rangatahi face. Teacher support for student initiatives and collaborations between students and teachers can empower young people to make a difference.

"Teachers see the bullying happen and do nothing about it. I could say something, but I don't have any power over the bullies. Teachers do have power, and they could give detentions or punishments or embarrass the bully to see if they like it."

"Stepping up and caring more about your students mentally and physically because it's always overlooked and forced [to be] all about working and things like dress code."

CONCLUSION

There is significant variation in who experiences challenges at school and what challenges are navigated by young people. This means that efforts to foster school engagement must be responsive to the specific needs of individual student groups and school communities. This study was unique because it probed young people's perceptions of who has it easy or tough at school. These findings offer insights into the knowledge young people have of their peers, as well as their own experiences.

Bullying was a common concern among rangatahi - young people were acutely aware of the social consequences of not fitting in or standing out. Aotearoa has high rates of bullying compared to other OECD countries and specific types of bullying, such as being made fun of, have increased in recent years [6]. This may suggest a need for rangatahi to learn about otherness and difference to increase understanding and build tolerance.

The most common types of bullying in Aotearoa are social and relational [6]. Rangatahi described the school environment and its challenges primarily in relation to these sorts of experiences. This was also reflected in their suggestions about how to help those who have it tough at school – students want schools to nurture all parts of their identity, not just their academic selves. As a result, initiatives to increase school engagement should focus not only on learning and achievement but also students' experiences that make school a positive place to be.

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APPENDIX

App questions used:

Which groups of students do you feel have a tough time at your school?
What do you think makes it tough for them?
How could your school better support these people?
Which groups of students do you feel have an easy time at your school?
What makes it easy for them?

Method of data analysis: Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative (text) data [7,8]. Researchers developed themes that represented patterns of meaning that centred on a key idea or concept. A theme offered a rich description of the experiences or perspectives shared by participants. Braun and Clarke [7] outline a six-step process for reflexive thematic analysis but note that this type of research is iterative in nature.

A key component of reflexive thematic analysis is that the researcher is valued as an important and integrated part of the research process. This means that different researchers may develop different themes and reflects the complexity and richness of both researchers' and participants' lived realities.

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This report is part of the *Our Voices Summer Snapshot Series*. These reports focus on rangatahi understandings and lived experiences of wellbeing in Aotearoa, including school experiences and social support.

Visit https://ourvoices.auckland.ac.nz/ for more information or contact us at ourvoices@auckland.ac.nz.

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