



Schools & Teachers Influences That Matter

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AIM: To describe the characteristics of good schools and teachers using youth voice data collected from the *Tō Mātou Rerenga - Our Journey* app.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

- A range of factors contribute to perceived quality of schools and teachers.
- Rangatahi see school as a place of academic and personal growth.
- Students' interpersonal relationships with both students and teachers are paramount to positive school experiences.
- Good teachers are skilled at teaching, managing the classroom and relating to their students.

What do we know?

In Aotearoa, young people spend 190 days at school each year¹, making it a critically important developmental context for promoting wellbeing. Young people's experience of the school environment is influenced by a range of factors. Rangatahi in Aotearoa have previously reported that a positive school experience depends upon the quality, support and involvement of **teachers, family, and friends**². In particular, teachers are instrumental to supporting students and their learning³.

What can we learn?

Previous research has explored the perspectives of a diverse range of people about what makes a good school and a good teacher. However, these perspectives are often reflective of a specific group of students. Additionally, promoting the wellbeing of young people requires evidence that is up-to-date and context specific. Our Voices asked a range of 13-year-olds for their thoughts on what makes a good school and a good teacher. We analysed these responses alongside descriptions of their schools to identify the characteristics of good schools and teachers that promote positive student experiences.

ABOUT OUR VOICES The Our Voices project aims to better understand the diverse and complex journey our young people experience growing up in Aotearoa to inform policy and services targeted to supporting their wellbeing. *Tō Mātou Rerenga - Our Journey* is an app co-designed with young people to share their lived experiences and resulted in the collection of rich qualitative multi-modal information from almost 1,000 13-year-olds participating in the *Growing Up in New Zealand* longitudinal study. The collaborative research programme uses innovative research methods and policy partnerships to help shape the future for generations to come. The project was funded by the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment and involves a multidisciplinary team of national and international experts. For more information visit <https://ourvoices.auckland.ac.nz/>.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD SCHOOL?

Young people reflected on a variety of factors that make up a good school. Interestingly, although rangatahi valued learning and achievement, many other factors were acknowledged as contributing to a good school and, by extension, good academic outcomes. This holistic approach to schooling was reflected in young people's expectations that school is a place that should be safe, friendly, high quality, future-focused and fun.

An overarching theme that summarise rangatahi perceptions of a good school is: **Variety, diversity** and **abundance**. This was discussed in terms of academic and extracurricular opportunities and the school community and indicates that rangatahi see school as a space with much potential and have many hopes for what their education can offer them.



Health and safety

A good school makes rangatahi feel safe and secure. This is facilitated by the structural and cultural environment of the school - feeling safe from threats physically but also feeling safe to enjoy the social aspects of school.

"A safe friendly learning space where students are not shy or afraid to ask for help if needed."

A good school provides:

- A comfortable, warm and hygienic environment, where students can access food and healthcare, and feel physically healthy.
- Good mental and emotional health support that enables students to feel happy at school.
- Unconditional inclusivity, safety, equity and respect for all students.

Presence of friends, absence of bullies

One of the most common reasons young people wanted to go to school was to see their friends. Rangatahi also emphasised that a good school has no bullies or works to reduce bullying by taking a proactive approach.

"Having my friends in my classes and making lots of new friends."



Good students and teachers

Good schools are filled with good students and good teachers. However, these more general responses are difficult to analyse. Good students could refer to the academic ability and achievement of the cohort, or their behaviour and conduct in the classroom. Good teachers could be interpreted as having the ability to make school worth coming to.

"Good people and staff."

"A good education system."

"Good people, good spaces, good curriculum and good resources."

Extracurricular activities and facilities

School is not just about academic learning and achievement, but rather gaining a range of experiences that help students to prepare for life after school.

Good schools were described as having high quality recreational facilities and a variety of extracurricular activities for students to use and engage in.

"Heaps of opportunities for you to get stuck into, whether it be from sports to music."

A good school also helps to prepare rangatahi for the future by teaching them life lessons, such as: how to be a good citizen, how to make friends, how to connect with people from diverse backgrounds and how to follow the rules.



Fun

Despite school being oriented towards the future, rangatahi want to enjoy the 'here and now' of school life. Students want their learning to be fun and to pursue their interests out of passion and curiosity. Good grades should not always be the primary outcome of attending a lesson.

"A place where you can learn and have fun at the same time."

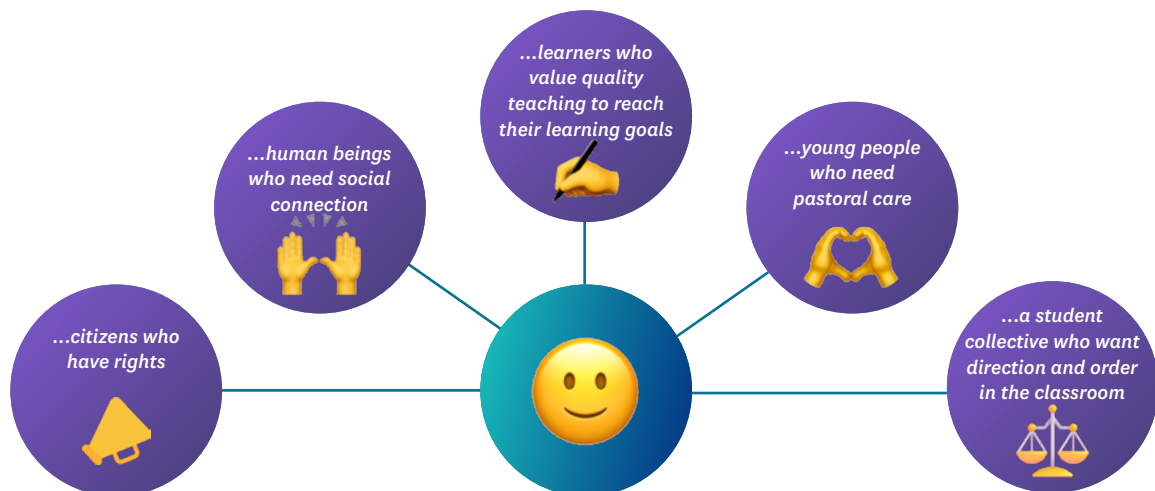
"When it's fun and easy to learn new things."

What makes a good teacher?

Rangatahi drew on their own schooling experiences to inform their responses about what makes a good teacher. This means that when young people had negative school experiences, a good teacher was often described in terms of what teachers should not do: **"Not yelling because you don't understand something."**

School can be understood as a microcosm of society, where rangatahi are learning how to operate in the wider

world: social growth through extracurriculars, physical growth through sports, and creative growth through music, arts and drama. In this microcosm of society, young people are also fulfilling different roles and working out who they are within these roles. This was reflected in the different ways that young people described good teachers.



RESPONSES TO ‘WHAT MAKES A GOOD TEACHER’ REFLECTED THE ROLE OF RANGATAHI AS...

...learners who value quality teaching to reach their learning goals

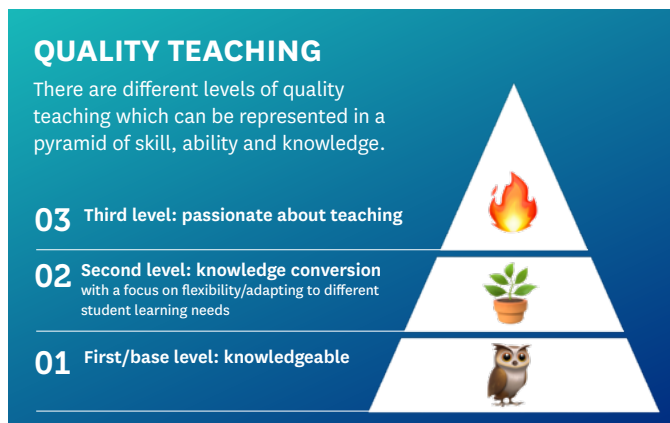
Students want to learn and see teachers as being responsible for supporting their learning journeys. They want their teachers to be **capable**, **skilled** and **passionate** educators.

“Someone who cares about what they teach. Wants the best for students. Knows what they are teaching well.”

...a student collective who want direction and order in the classroom

Young people recognised that teachers are in a position of authority. They want teachers to use this power effectively to promote a positive classroom climate. However, this requires a balance between control and respect.

“Strict teacher with a sense of purpose, but not overly strict either.”



...citizens who have rights

Equal, equitable and fair treatment are different but related concepts. Young people’s responses reflected a diversity in understandings about what fairness looks like in the classroom. This is a tension for teachers who must treat everyone equally while also ensuring that they meet the unique needs of students so that they can reach their full potential.

“A teacher who is fair, who listens, who does not have favourite people.”

...young people who need pastoral care

A good teacher is caring, kind, supportive, and respectful towards their students, and makes students feel welcomed, comfortable, and valued. Young people appreciated teachers who supported their personal and academic growth. These values reflect that teachers have a duty of care and is captured by the concept of manaakitanga⁴.

“Supportive, caring, happy and helpful to all students.”



...human beings who need social connection

Students want to connect with their teachers on a personal level, making them easier to relate to and forming the basis of strong student-teacher relationships. Rangatahi also want their teachers to be good people who are **“kind and fair and actually listen to you.”**

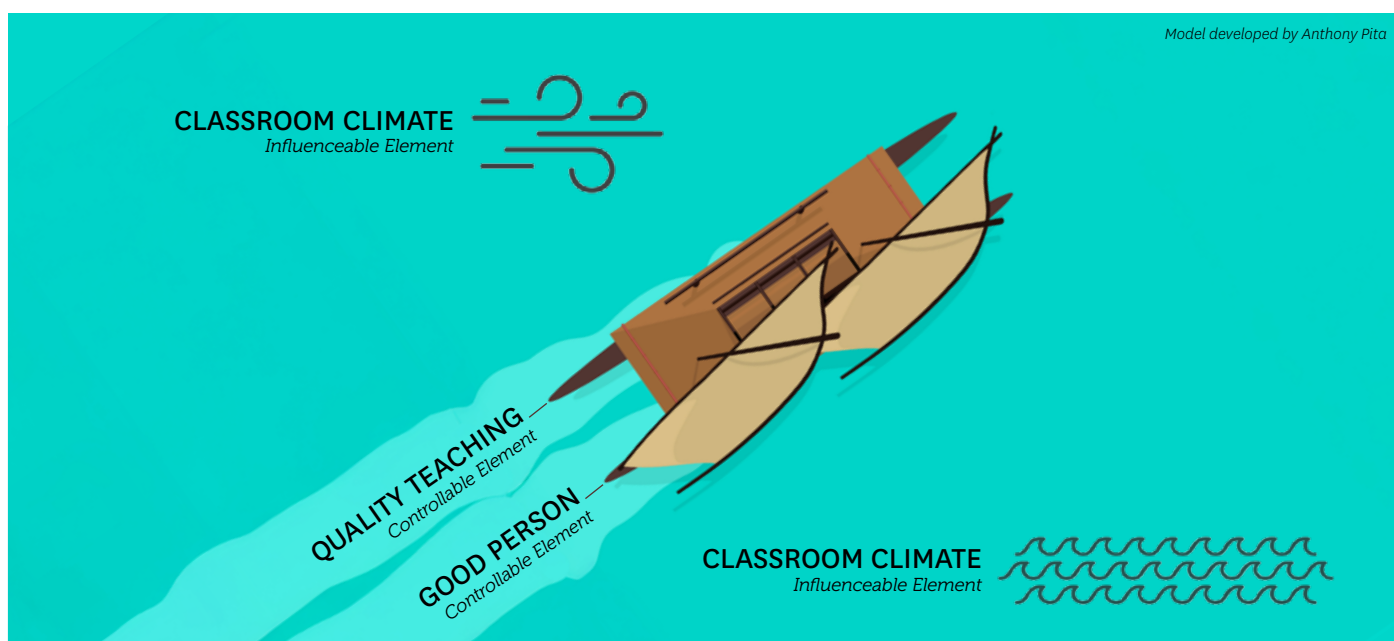


BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER WITH WAKA HOURUA – A MODEL OF WHAT MAKES A GOOD TEACHER

Being a good teacher requires teachers to be skilled and knowledgeable in a range of areas. A good teacher provides quality teaching, is a good person and promotes a positive classroom climate.

A waka hourua is a double-hulled waka that Polynesians used to cross the Pacific. It represents an efficient vehicle to get to one's destination. Teachers can be the vessel that helps to move students from their starting point to the end where they have fulfilled their academic potential and enjoyed the learning and school experience.

The two hulls in the waka hourua model are being a 'good person' and 'quality teaching'. Teachers can largely control these two facets of their teaching ability and practice. However, reaching the end destination also depends on the students. Teachers can influence the classroom climate by being an effective leader but require the cooperation of the student group. Thus, teachers can adjust the sails of the waka hourua to navigate the unpredictable nature of the ocean, but ultimately they cannot control the current and swells that they are sailing in.



CONCLUSION

Young people want to learn. To enable this, schools must be safe places that meet students' physical, mental, social and cultural needs. This suggests that school staff must help to cultivate a positive school climate that supports the holistic growth of individuals⁵ which will, in turn, promote academic learning and achievement. Rangatahi also want to have fun at school, further emphasising school as a place of personal growth.

Some responses suggest that not all students are having positive experiences at school. Young people drew on their lived experiences to describe good schools and good teachers. Some rangatahi framed their responses in terms of what a good teacher should not do. Responses that described the need for schools to take a stronger stance on bullying reflect another area that requires further efforts to improve the student experience.

An important characteristic of good schools and teachers is social connection. Rangatahi aspire to be good people and to surround themselves with good people. Social connections with teachers are a key part of this. Teachers who cared about students by just 'checking-in' or taking the time to understand the reasons behind why schoolwork had not been completed, for example, meant a great deal. This highlights that young people value teachers both for their subject knowledge and their qualities as people who have the opportunity to make the daily lives of their students better.



APPENDIX

App questions used:

How would you describe your school?
 Why would you describe it this way?
 What makes a good school?
 What makes a good teacher?



Method of data analysis:

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative (text) data^{6,7}. 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 Clarke⁶ 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 youth 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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- ¹ Crow, J. (2018). [Statistic of the Month: How Much Time Do Students Spend in School?](#). NCEE.
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