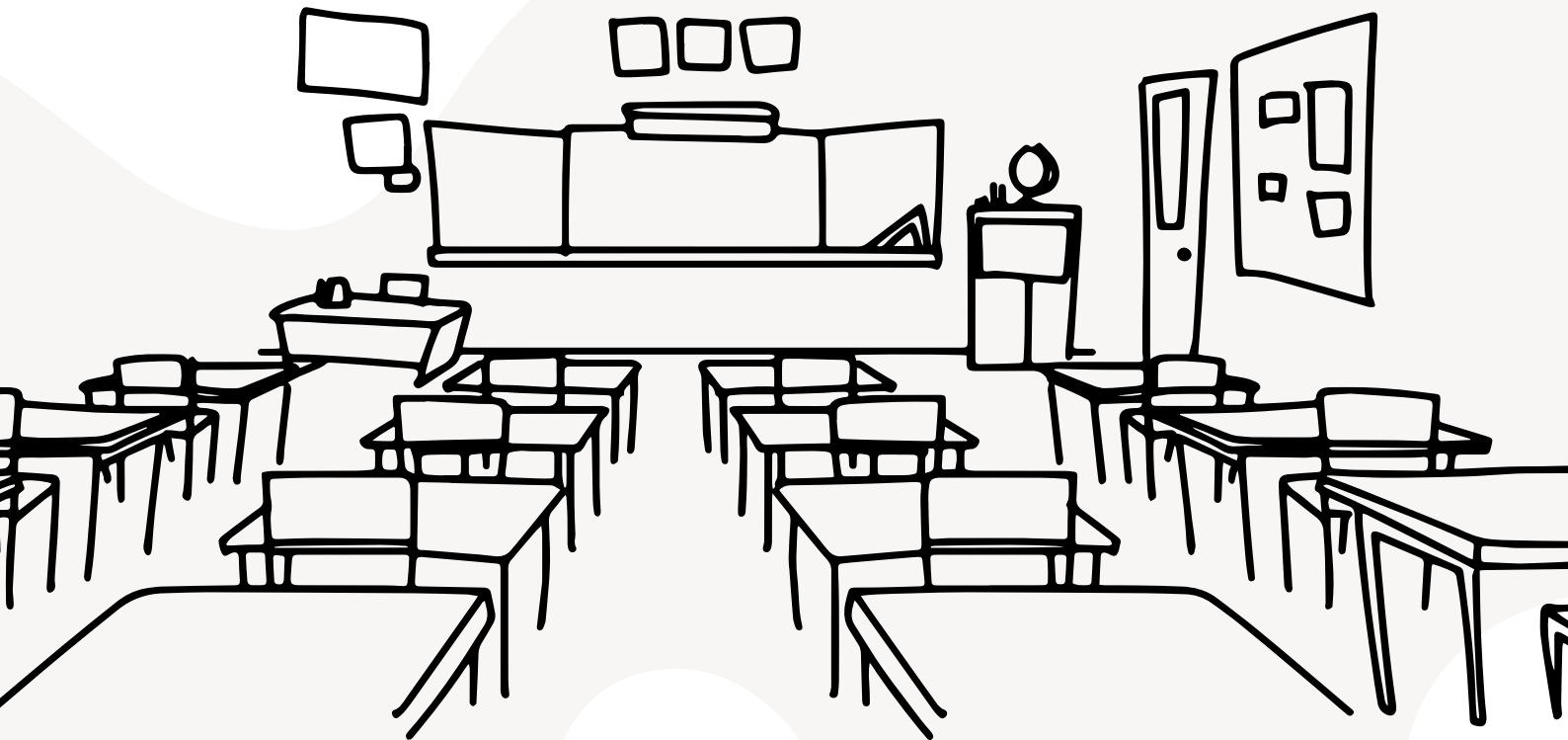




ABSENT VOICES

Understanding the stories of Non-Enrolled
Tamariki and Rangatahi



Outstanding Youth Champion – NZ Youth Awards

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Foreword

As a former educationalist it is with sadness that in a post pandemic world, school attendance in New Zealand has never been at a lower ebb. Disturbing statistics show not only low levels of regular attendance for many children across the country, but an escalating number of young people who through their chronic truancy have become officially non-enrolled in the schooling system.

We know that regular school attendance is crucial for acquiring knowledge, developing skills, and building relationships with peers as well as teachers. We know that dis-engagement from education especially at an early age, robs young people of their future potential and sets them up for poorer life outcomes not just as a youth but right through their adult years.

There is a lot of research, both in New Zealand and around the world, as to the effects of truancy, but there was an identified gap in the localised research around the young people who have become non-enrolled in South Auckland and their reasons why.

This research has reached out to this cohort of young people to gather “their voice” and to ask them “why” they are deciding to walk away from their education and “how” they had found their educational journey to date.

This research will hopefully challenge thinking around current education models and at the same time give us some clarity around how we could, for some young people, do things better.

Brendon Crompton
CEO NZ Blue Light

Acknowledgements

This research project would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions and support of many individuals and organisations. First and foremost, we extend our deepest gratitude to the young people who participated in this study. Your courage to share your experiences and insights has been instrumental in shedding light on the challenges and opportunities within our education system. It is your experiences, words, hopes and concerns that have informed our report.

We also acknowledge the support of the Ministry of Education and the Associate Minister for championing this important work. Your commitment to exploring innovative solutions for attendance management is crucial. Special thanks to the BlueLight team for their unwavering dedication to youth development and for facilitating this research with the highest standards of ethical practice.

We are grateful to the whānau and communities who partnered with us, providing essential perspectives and support throughout this project. Finally, we thank the research team for their meticulous efforts and dedication to ensuring the voices of Tamariki and Rangatahi are heard and valued. Your hard work and commitment have made this project a success.

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Executive Summary

This study aims at understanding the barriers and reasons behind the increasing number of young people (YP) opting out of the school system. At the heart of this research is a commitment to Youth-Centred practice, recognising that youth participation is vital for positive youth development. We asked YP to describe the factors that led them to opt out of school. We also asked YP to tell us what they would like to change about the school system. By engaging Tamariki and Rangatahi directly, we have honoured New Zealand's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which guarantees every child the right to express their views freely and access information and ideas. We believe that YP have much to offer decision-makers seeking to address the significant challenges of non-enrolment and the re-engagement of non-enrolled youth in education.

Interviews covered a range of YPs' experiences, including experiences outside of school. Our analysis of the YPs' comments about school resulted in three themes: **School Hosts Teenage Drama; Mental Health Needs to be Taken Seriously at School;** and **Great Expectations: Teachers Should Care About Me.** These three themes have been explored in detail to help us understand the experiences of young people who are not enrolled at school.

Theme 1: School Hosts Teenage Drama

The theme *School Hosts Teenage Drama* explores the idea that school is often a place of overwhelming social interactions, bullying, and conflict. YP told us that transitioning to secondary school complicates maintaining friendships, and bullying becomes more prevalent. Social media exacerbates these issues.

Theme 2: Mental Health Needs to be Taken Seriously at School

The theme *Mental Health Needs to be Taken Seriously at School* explores the significant challenges faced by young people (YP) due to inadequate mental health support in schools.

YP reported anxiety, low self-esteem, and suicidality, often linked to external hardships like family conflicts. These burdens are exacerbated by a lack of empathetic and effective support at school, with rigid academic expectations adding pressure. Without proper support, students reported resorting to harmful coping mechanisms like drug use, further impacting their school engagement and success.

Theme 3: Great Expectations: Teachers Should Care About Me

The theme *Great Expectations: Teachers Should Care About Me* explores an expectation expressed by YP that teachers should demonstrate care and understanding towards students. Young people value meaningful relationships with teachers who see and respect their complex lives.

Relationships with teachers were deemed especially important for students facing mental health challenges or learning disabilities. Our development of this theme suggests that feeling cared for and respected by teachers significantly impacts students' overall school experience.

The three themes highlighted in this report provide an understanding of YP's lived experiences from multiple angles. The exploration of these themes has been used to address six research questions that guide this study.

The Research Questions

Q1: How do YP describe positive experiences with school in the past?

Positive experiences at school were often centred around friendships. Participants placed great value on their relationships with their peers. For example, one participant described a fond memory of school as, "When I got to see my friends and see how happy they were to see me" (#11). Another participant mentioned, "School was best when I was 10 and I had a lot of friends that I could play with after school" (#5).

Q2: What factors drove YP away from school?

Social Conflict and Bullying: Participants described school as a place of social conflict and bullying, which was particularly prevalent in secondary school. "Of course there was bullies" (#1), and "Friends are the whole reason that I'm still here. If I was still getting bullied, I probably wouldn't be here" (#7).

Mental Health Struggles: Participants often carried mental and emotional burdens when they walked through the school gates and felt that schools did not genuinely address their well-being. "They're always so quick to be like 'we respect your well-being,' but when it really comes to that point, they just like brush it off" (#22).

Teacher Relationships: Experiences with teachers who fell short of expectations were a key factor. Participants felt that some teachers did not understand or care about their personal struggles. "All the teachers hate me cos they all just think I'm a naughty kid... I hate going to their classes" (#14).

Q3: What were the moments when something could have been done to keep YP in school?

Addressing Bullying: Participants felt that more should have been done by school authorities to prevent bullying. "The school has to be taking care of the students and stuff. So if anything happens, they should actually go and like stop it" (#15).

Providing Mental Health Support: There was a clear need for better mental health support. "Just the extra support for people that do struggle with mental health issues and to have their say in what they go through" (#21).

Teacher Engagement: Participants expressed that if teachers had shown more care and understanding, it could have made a difference. "My science teacher, she sent an email to me, and she's like, 'Hey, are you okay?' And I'm like, 'Yeah, I'm just really stressed.' And she's the only teacher that's ever done that to me" (#17).

Q4: What changes do YP think their school could have made to support them?

More Effective Anti-Bullying Measures: Participants wanted schools to take more proactive steps to prevent and address bullying. "They should stop it or like go help them out or something. Yeah, I reckon I would be staying in school if it was like that" (#15).

Enhanced Mental Health Services: Participants desired more substantial mental health support within the school. "People that go through mental health problems and mental health struggles and that affects their learning... would probably need that kind of support extra around learning to their needs" (#21).

Increased Teacher Support and Understanding: Participants wanted teachers to be more empathetic and supportive. "I just wish they would understand us" (#20).

Q5: [How do YP describe their ideal learning environment today?](#)

Supportive and Safe Environment: An ideal school environment would be one where students feel safe and supported, with effective measures against bullying.

Accessible Mental Health Resources: Schools should have accessible and effective mental health resources to support students' well-being.

Engaged and Empathetic Teachers: Teachers should be trained to understand and support students' individual needs and struggles, fostering a caring and respectful relationship.

Q6: [How could a Youth Worker help YP re-engage with education?](#)

Providing Emotional and Social Support: Youth Workers can offer a supportive presence and help students navigate social conflicts and personal struggles.

Facilitating Access to Mental Health Services: They can act as a bridge between students and mental health resources, ensuring students receive the support they need.

Mentoring and Guidance: Youth Workers can mentor students, helping them develop decision-making strategies and set goals for their future, providing guidance that students may feel is lacking from their teachers. This mentoring needs to be consistent and long-term if it is to nurture the resilience needed to transition back into school.

Introduction

We are pleased to present the findings of the *Absent Voices: Understanding the stories of Non-Enrolled Tamariki and Rangatahi* research project, a study aimed at understanding the barriers and reasons behind the increasing number of young people opting out of the school system. Central to this project has been a youth development framework where young people are at the centre of all we do. It is the young people's voice that needs to be heard, and this is what we have been honoured to listen to and hear. This research was conducted with young people to better understand drivers of school non-enrolment and identify strategies that may help to address the significant challenge of re-engagement of non-enrolled young people in education.

The Government's strategy to address the decade-long decline in school attendance and engagement encompasses clear expectations for stakeholders, ambitious attendance targets, and bold actions. Our research contributes to these bold actions by delving into the reasons behind the increasing disengagement from school among young people and explores solution pathways to address this impactful issue.

The findings of this research are intended to inform the design of an effective Non-Enrolment Notification Service (NENS) service and to contribute to achieving the recent and current National Education and Learning Priorities.

Blue Light Non-Enrolment Notification Service

This study was led by the Non-Enrolment Notification Service (NENS) team at Blue Light. The NENS team work with thousands of Tamariki and Rangatahi who are not enrolled in school. Blue Light is contracted by the Ministry of Education (MOE) as a brief intervention service to re-engage young people with schooling in the South Auckland area.

Each Blue Light Youth Worker is challenged to serve the needs of more than 40 YP at a time. This large caseload impacts Youth Workers' capacity to promptly engage with the high number of incoming new referrals. Youth Workers connect and build rapport with youth and their whānau to better understand their situation, needs and the barriers keeping them from engaging with education.

Once a young person has not attended school for 20 consecutive days, they must be registered as non-enrolled by their school. Prior to this, schools should be utilising an attendance service of some kind to try and keep youth engaged in schooling while they are still enrolled. Anecdotally, many non-enrolled young people on Blue Light's books seem to leave school with minimal or no intervention recorded.

The NENS team at Blue Light typically have 1500-2000 young people on their books, with up to 100 new referrals each week. Several of these YP will be enrolled in a community-based service funded by other government agencies. These students, however, remain on the system as non-enrolled if the service provider they are engaged with is not MOE funded or is not an approved education facility. There is often no appropriate MOE funded service for these students. Cases can only be closed if a YP is enrolled in school (inclusive of correspondence schooling), alternative education, is given an exemption by MOE for home education or an early leaving exemption, or has turned 16 years old.

As Blue Light is funded as a brief intervention service, the ongoing needs of many YP go unattended. The lack of long-term support presents a significant barrier to consistent engagement with education. Ideally, YP need to be connected with a community-based service that can support them and their whānau on an ongoing basis. Often this is not possible and too often we meet whānau where the support has not been consistent and is no longer available.

Our Research Approach: Research with Young People, By Young People

The research took a uniquely collaborative, Youth-Centred approach to engage with non-enrolled young people through the relationships built by the Blue Light Youth Worker team. The project included a co-creation workshop with Youth Workers which identified important issues for setting up and reassuring YP on the purpose and confidentiality of the interviews. Members of the youth team who were undertaking interviews were guided on qualitative interview techniques that helped open a safe space for young people to tell their stories. A discussion guide was developed with open-ended questions, and a flexible approach to allow the participant to lead the direction of the conversation. Research tools included a timeline map of school/life events and a selection of words and pictures for YP to choose from to enable them to share their experiences.

Interviews were arranged through Blue Light's network of non-enrolled young people and conducted at a convenient time and place to be safe and private. With agreement of YP, interviews were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis and reporting. To thank them for their participation a Prezzy card of \$50 was provided as an incentive. There was also a commitment from the research team to ensure their voices were heard and to share the findings from the research with them.



Developing Themes

Thematic analysis (TA) of the dataset was undertaken. The thematic analysis methodology developed by Braun & Clarke (2006) guided the analysis. Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis methodology has been implemented widely in education and social work research. TA offers researchers an accessible framework for interpreting a qualitative dataset and telling a story about patterns across the dataset (Joy et al, 2023). In their 2006 paper, Braun & Clarke describe six phases of TA: (1.) Familiarising yourself with your data; (2.) Generating initial codes; (3.) Searching for themes; (4.) Reviewing themes; (5.) Defining and naming themes; and (6.) producing the report. The authors stress, however, that these phases are guidelines only. Moreover, TA is not described as a linear process but a "*recursive* process, where movement is back and forth as needed, throughout the phases" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86).

A simplified TA methodology was used in this study, consisting of three distinct phases and prioritising movement back and forward between phases. In the first phase, initial codes were applied to the dataset. Codes "identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). Interview recordings were listened to, and comments of interest were noted down. Codes were applied to each comment of interest. One code could occasionally be applied to several comments. In the second phase, initial themes were produced. A theme organises several features of the dataset around one central idea. Similar codes were collated, and initial themes were generated. Here the initial coding phase was revisited. Sections of the dataset were recoded to develop more coherent and interesting clusters under initial themes. The third phase was producing the report. This phase was just as much an analysis phase as the previous two. Themes were revised where they overlapped with other themes, or where aspects of themes warranted further analysis. It is in this phase that themes were finalised and defined.

In recent years, Braun & Clarke have added the term “reflexive” to their writings on TA to highlight the researcher’s role in knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Accordingly, they advise that researchers not think of themselves as *searching* for themes in a dataset but *generating* themes, through close engagement with the dataset. This engagement and the subsequent generation of themes is invariably coloured by the researcher’s subjectivities and assumptions (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Acknowledging the researcher’s role in knowledge production is important in this study, where the focus is otherwise on *reporting* youth voices. This study is committed to telling the stories of the young people involved. However, it should be borne in mind that the researchers in this project control which stories are told, and which are omitted. This study does not aim to report on all patterns across the dataset. The focus here is on reporting the stories of youth in a way that tells a story about why young people might not be enrolled in mainstream schooling.

Findings

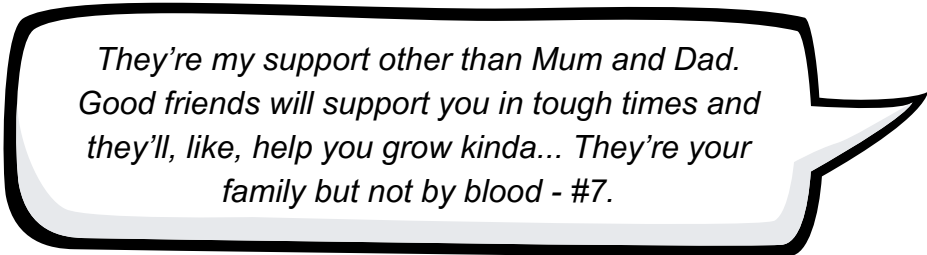
Demographics

We spoke with 27 young individuals with ages ranging from 13 to 17. Among them, the most common age is 15. Gender distribution shows a slight male majority, with 15 males and 12 females. The ethnic composition is diverse, with several individuals identifying with multiple ethnicities. The most frequently mentioned ethnicity is Māori, with 12 individuals identifying solely or partly as Māori. Other notable ethnic groups include NZ European (8 individuals), Tongan (4 individuals including those with mixed ethnicity), and smaller groups like Māori/Cook Island, Māori/Fijian, Māori/Dutch, Sāmoan, South African, and Afghan. This demographic summary highlights a multicultural cohort with a balanced gender distribution, predominantly composed of individuals identifying as Māori and NZ European.

Theme 1. School Hosts Teenage Drama

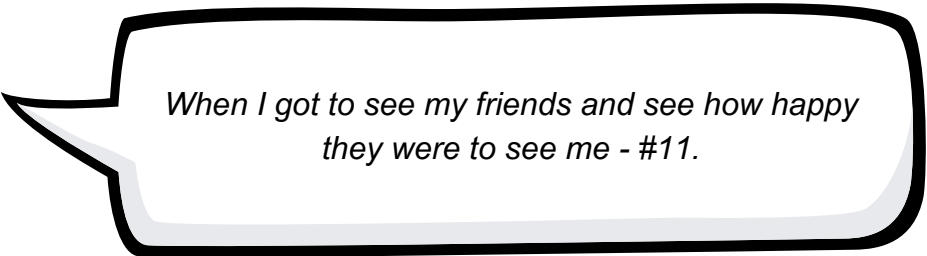
The theme *School Hosts Teenage Drama* explores an idea expressed across the dataset that school, by bringing young people together in one location, hosts social interactions with peers that are often overwhelming, disruptive or hurtful. The term “drama” was used by several YP. “Drama” has been chosen here to capture a range of negatively perceived events and behaviours that are centred on interactions with fellow youth. This includes bullying, fighting, conflict, strain on relationships, and risk-taking behaviour.

YP placed great value on their relationships with their peers. The importance of friends for a healthy and meaningful life was expressed in many ways across the dataset. One participant referred to friends as formative influences, just like immediate family:



They're my support other than Mum and Dad. Good friends will support you in tough times and they'll, like, help you grow kinda... They're your family but not by blood - #7.

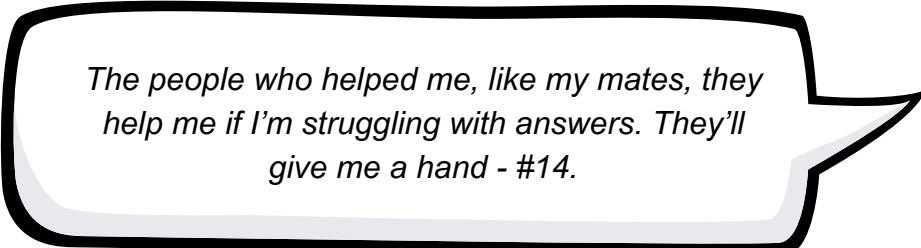
It is not surprising, then, that positive experiences at school were often centred around friendships. When asked to describe a fond memory of school, one participant responded:



When I got to see my friends and see how happy they were to see me - #11.

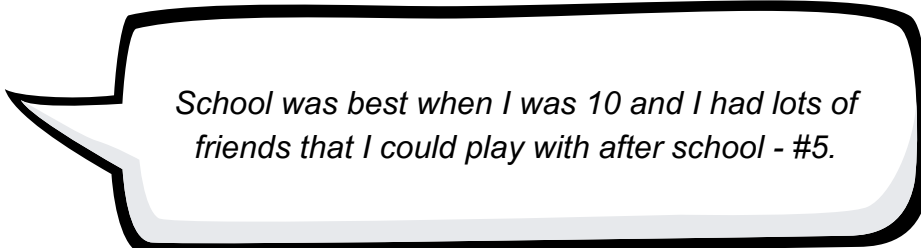
Friends also offered valuable support at school. Where students fall behind in academic studies and homework, they may struggle to catch up and look to their peers for help.

For non-enrolled young people who have missed out on classes the task of catching up may feel even more daunting and become an additional barrier for YP to re-engage in learning. One participant described friends at school as:



The people who helped me, like my mates, they help me if I'm struggling with answers. They'll give me a hand - #14.

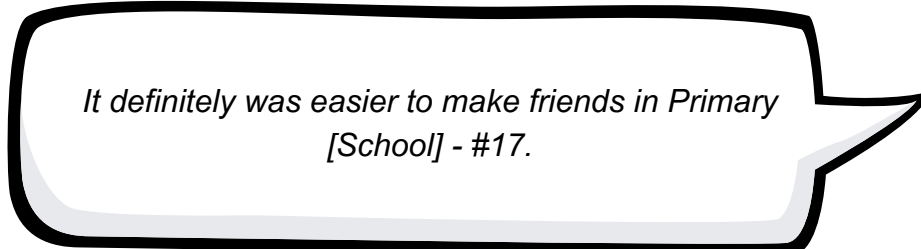
School was spoken of positively when it facilitated friendships, by bringing peers together.



School was best when I was 10 and I had lots of friends that I could play with after school - #5.

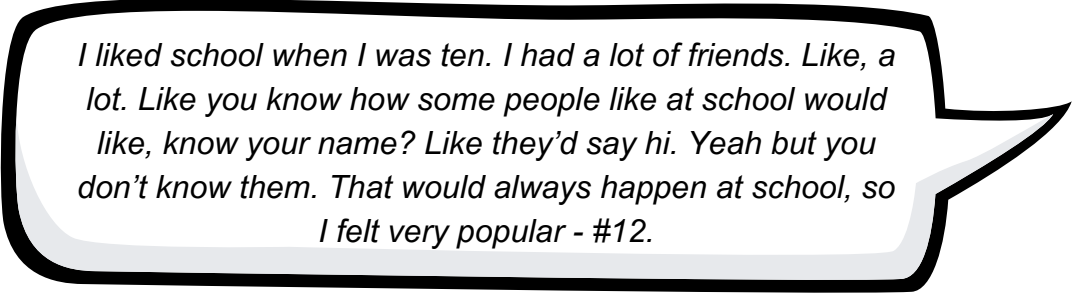
The importance of friendships for engagement at school has been highlighted by other research (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2018). What changed in the lives of these YP that meant that relationships with peers could no longer provide positive experiences at school?

Making new friends, and maintaining existing friendships, was reported to get more difficult with age.



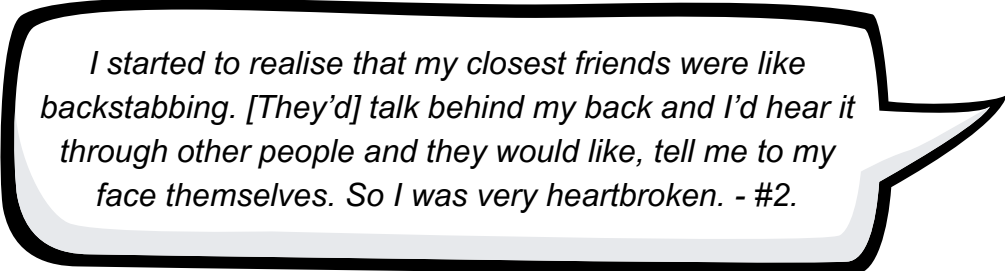
It definitely was easier to make friends in Primary [School] - #17.

Consider these two comments from the same participant, reflecting on their relationships with other young people at primary school and then at secondary school. Having friends is described as almost effortless at primary school:



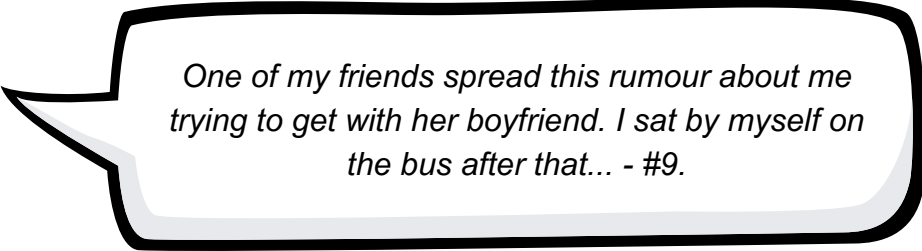
I liked school when I was ten. I had a lot of friends. Like, a lot. Like you know how some people like at school would like, know your name? Like they'd say hi. Yeah but you don't know them. That would always happen at school, so I felt very popular - #12.

At secondary school, however, even close friendships were described as fragile and potentially toxic:



I started to realise that my closest friends were like backstabbing. [They'd] talk behind my back and I'd hear it through other people and they would like, tell me to my face themselves. So I was very heartbroken. - #2.

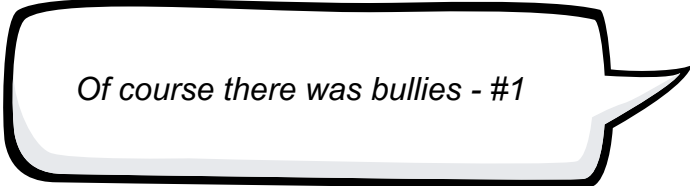
The difficulty of maintaining strong relationships was related to several factors, such as the normalcy of bullying at secondary school, social media, and conflicts between relationships.



One of my friends spread this rumour about me trying to get with her boyfriend. I sat by myself on the bus after that... - #9.

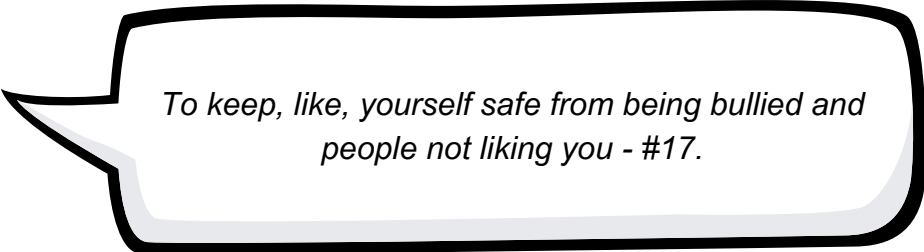
The transitions from childhood to adolescence and from primary school to high school were reported to be difficult times for maintaining the relationships that are clearly so important to their experience of school. This finding supports other research that frames periods of transition as an important site for youth interventions (Munford & Sanders, 2019).

Without good friends, school was described as a dangerous place due to bullying – especially at secondary school. Bullying was a common feature of schooling experiences. As one participant succinctly put it:



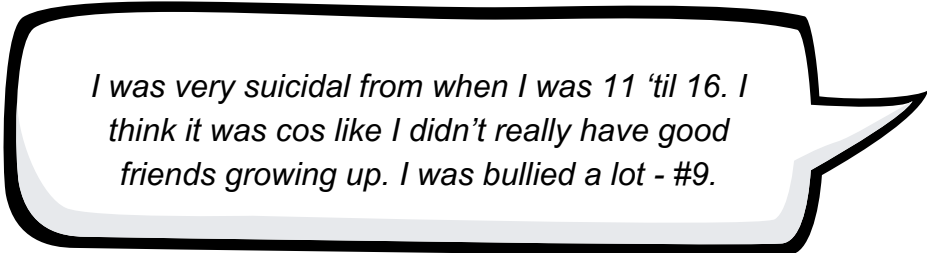
Of course there was bullies - #1

One of the challenges YP face at school is to avoid being bullied:



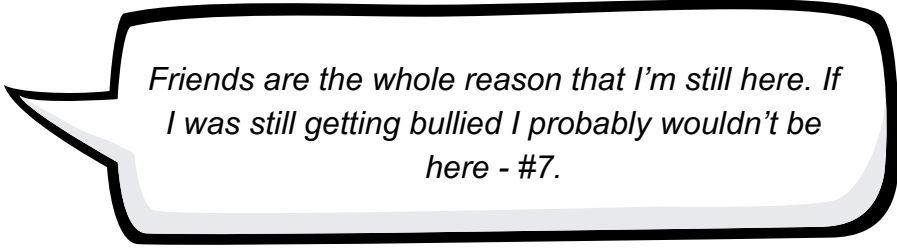
To keep, like, yourself safe from being bullied and people not liking you - #17.

It is interesting that the difficulty of making friends was directly related to being exposed to bullying. One comment is suggestive of the consequences when a young person can't make good friends:



I was very suicidal from when I was 11 'til 16. I think it was cos like I didn't really have good friends growing up. I was bullied a lot - #9.

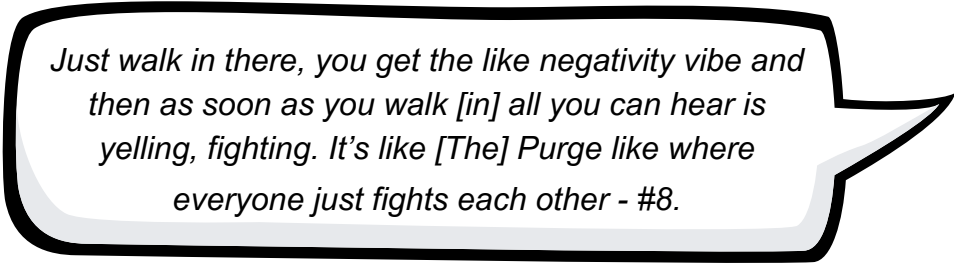
This following comment highlights having friends as vitally important to cope with the onslaught of bullying:



Friends are the whole reason that I'm still here. If I was still getting bullied I probably wouldn't be here - #7.

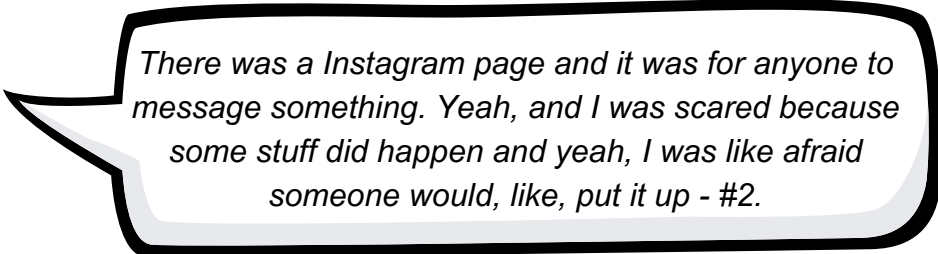
It appears that good friends are doubly important, especially at secondary school, because they can act as a shield from bullying. Without reliable friends, school is a perilous place.

Even when not directly exposed to bullying, secondary school was described as an unfriendly place due to the behaviour of peers.



Just walk in there, you get the like negativity vibe and then as soon as you walk [in] all you can hear is yelling, fighting. It's like [The] Purge like where everyone just fights each other - #8.

Unhealthy activity on social media was reported to revolve around school. When YP knew that social media was being used by their peers for bullying and sharing private information, they reported feeling especially anxious about attending school.



There was a Instagram page and it was for anyone to message something. Yeah, and I was scared because some stuff did happen and yeah, I was like afraid someone would, like, put it up - #2.

The dangers of social media for youth are well documented (Netsafe, 2018). This study suggests that the risks of social media are heightened at school where bullying and disrespect feels normalised.

Consider this example of social media risks being brought into the classroom:

One person had [received private content] and he showed all his friends... I walked into my class and they're all looking at me making fun of me... I felt like my life was about to end because more than one person had seen what I showed - #9.

YP also reported behaving like bullies themselves. This was described as a way of coping with the threat of bullying, a way of protecting oneself:

People try to bully me but I bully them back... it's not exactly bullying I'm just standing up for myself - #7.

This point is significant because several YP reported being kicked out of school for fighting. We can see how a desire to protect oneself can lead to behaviour that is not accepted by the school. It is also interesting that YP described not enjoying bullying others.

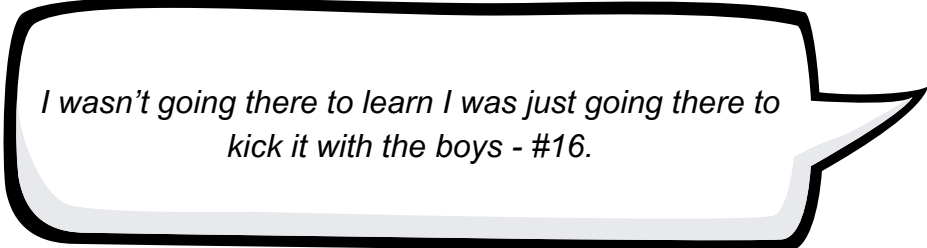
I bully people sometimes. I don't feel good about it. I just do it - #13.

YP reported resorting to other behaviours that they know are harmful, such as smoking, drug use, and theft, in an effort to be on the right side of peers.

[Being bullied made me feel] small, not important, not good enough. So then you wanna try and be good enough and then it's gonna go bad because then you're gonna start hanging out with the wrong people... trying to fit in too much... and then you end up losing yourself - #7.


This interpretation of the dataset suggests that YP often lack the skills to negotiate tricky social interactions and build healthy relationships.

This theme offers a glimpse into what school means for young people and what it might mean to choose to leave. For many YP, especially in the context of outside challenges in their home life, school is more urgently about social relations than it is about academic progress.



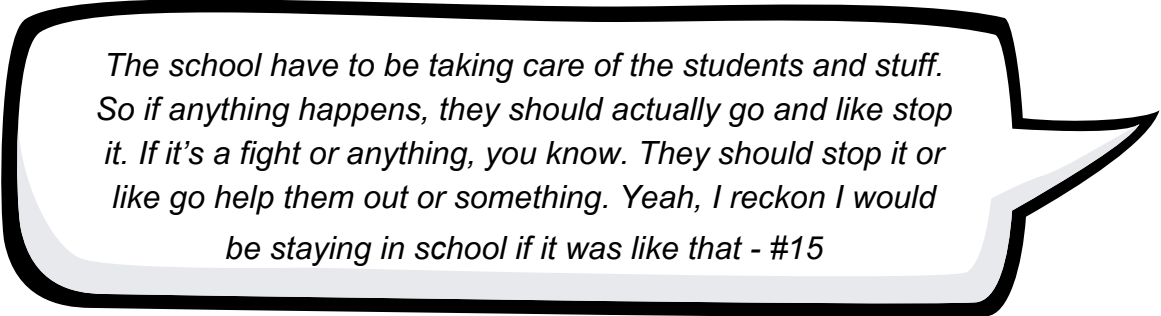
I wasn't going there to learn I was just going there to kick it with the boys - #16.

YP may be forced into trade-offs to manage conflicting demands and avoid negatives like bullying. To opt out of school is, in some cases, to flee harmful interactions with peers. As one participant put it:



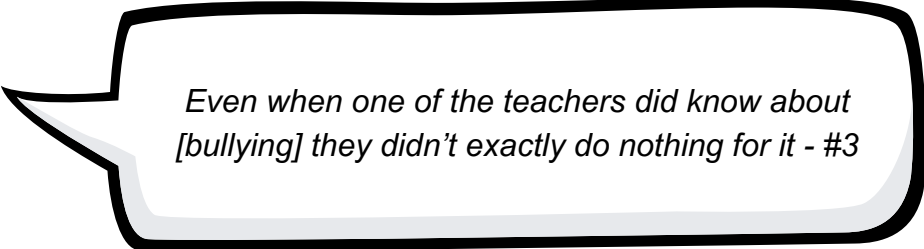
You can't exactly bully me if I'm not there - #3

We were interested in any changes that YP thought would encourage them to re-engage with school. One pattern that is relevant to this question is YP's perception that adults at school should do more to prevent social conflict.



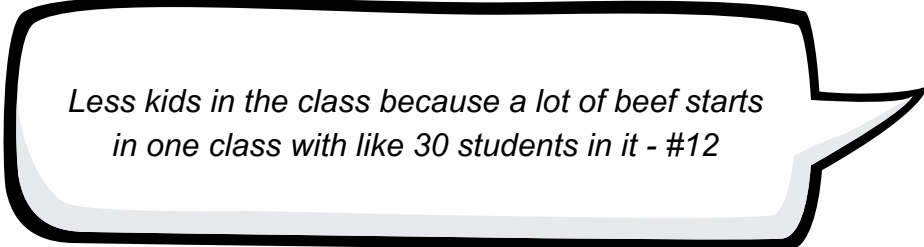
The school have to be taking care of the students and stuff. So if anything happens, they should actually go and like stop it. If it's a fight or anything, you know. They should stop it or like go help them out or something. Yeah, I reckon I would be staying in school if it was like that - #15

From the perspective of YP, adults at school often do little to address the social difficulties that come with bringing together large groups of teenagers. YP reported that some teachers turn a blind eye to conflict.



Even when one of the teachers did know about [bullying] they didn't exactly do nothing for it - #3

In the eyes of YP, school lets social conflict play out, largely unchecked. It was suggested that smaller classes might make it easier for teachers to address conflict.



Less kids in the class because a lot of beef starts in one class with like 30 students in it - #12

Our interpretation of the dataset suggests that students need school leaders to pay greater attention to social conflict and provide more support for building healthy relationships.

Theme Summary

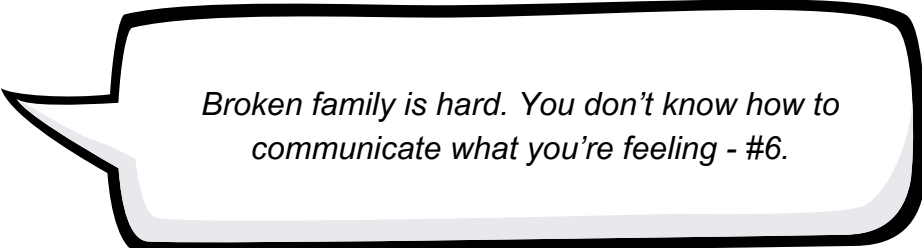
Outtakes and Implications: Participants lack guidance and advice to help navigate difficult relationships with their peers. Schools need to support positive relationships and take proactive steps to prevent bullying.

The Young Person's Ideal: A supportive and safe environment. A school environment where students feel safe and supported, with effective measures against bullying.

Role for Youth Workers: Providing emotional and social support. Youth Workers can offer a supportive presence and help students navigate social conflicts and personal struggles.

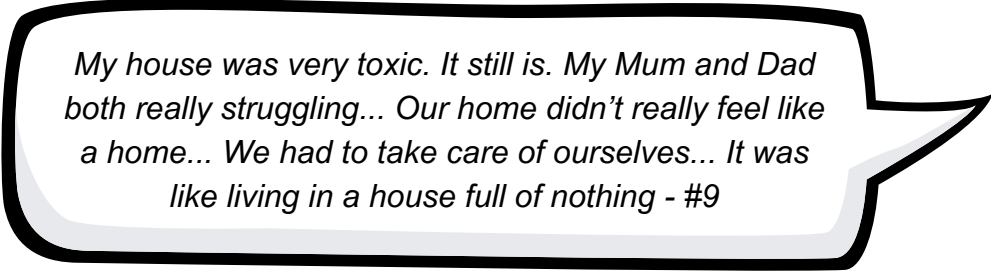
Theme 2. Mental Health Needs to be Taken Seriously at School

This theme explores patterned reports of a lack of support for mental health at school and the importance of this for school engagement. The issue of mental health and well-being was top of mind for the YP in this study. Mental health struggles, such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, overstimulation, and suicidality, were reported. Mental health challenges were often related to hardships outside of school, such as family conflict, loss, incarceration, and drug or alcohol abuse.



Broken family is hard. You don't know how to communicate what you're feeling - #6.

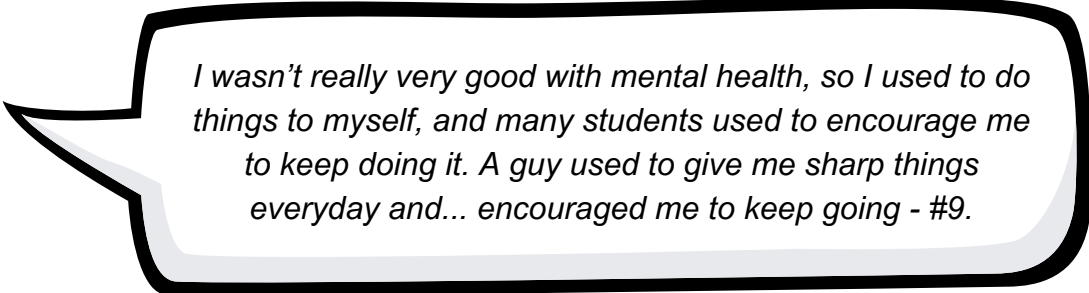
YP repeatedly reported carrying mental and emotional burdens on their shoulders before they arrived at the school gate.



My house was very toxic. It still is. My Mum and Dad both really struggling... Our home didn't really feel like a home... We had to take care of ourselves... It was like living in a house full of nothing - #9

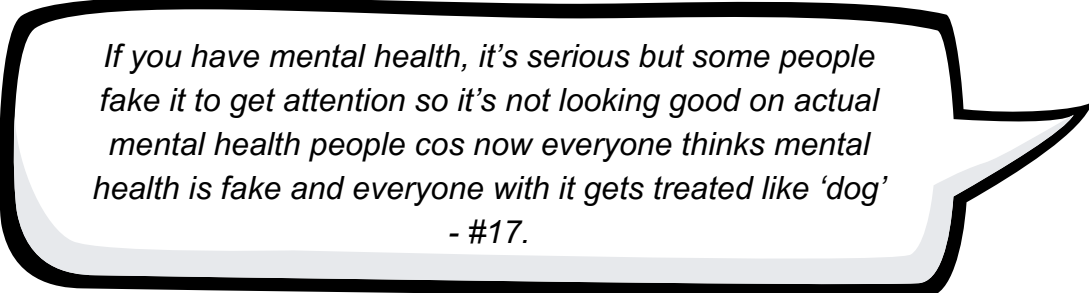
These remarks align with research that has found that many young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), experience poor well-being (Clark et al, 2022). Our focus here is a reported lack of support at school for these mental health and well-being challenges. How is support for mental health and well-being lacking and what effect does this lack of support have on engagement with school?

Considering the remarks about uncaring peers discussed in Theme 1, we were not surprised to hear that school can be a fraught environment for those with mental health challenges.



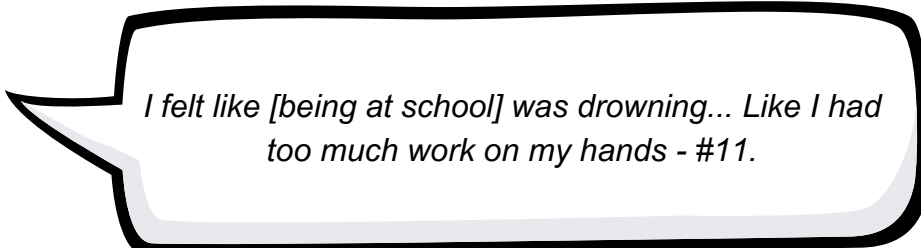
I wasn't really very good with mental health, so I used to do things to myself, and many students used to encourage me to keep doing it. A guy used to give me sharp things everyday and... encouraged me to keep going - #9.

For those who struggle with mental health, irresponsible peers pose great danger. As one participant insightfully noted, uncaring peers can also muddy the waters for school leaders who do want to provide support.



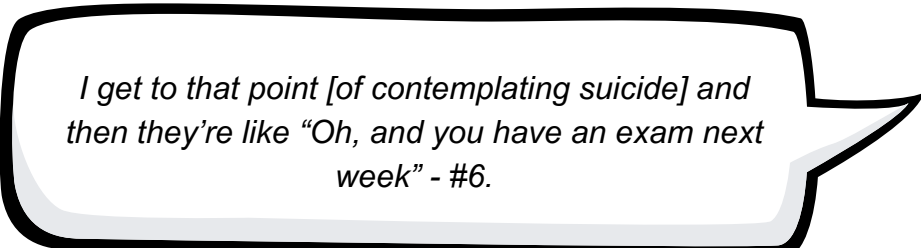
If you have mental health, it's serious but some people fake it to get attention so it's not looking good on actual mental health people cos now everyone thinks mental health is fake and everyone with it gets treated like 'dog' - #17.

Rigid and relentless workloads at school were also described as unforgiving of those experiencing mental health challenges.



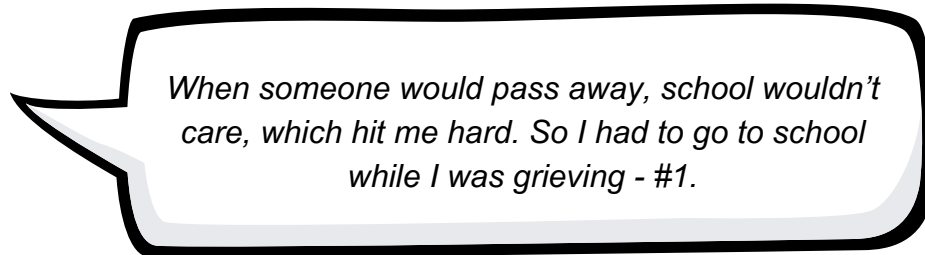
I felt like [being at school] was drowning... Like I had too much work on my hands - #11.

As much as they wanted to succeed at school, academic expectations often felt unreasonable for those who were struggling emotionally.



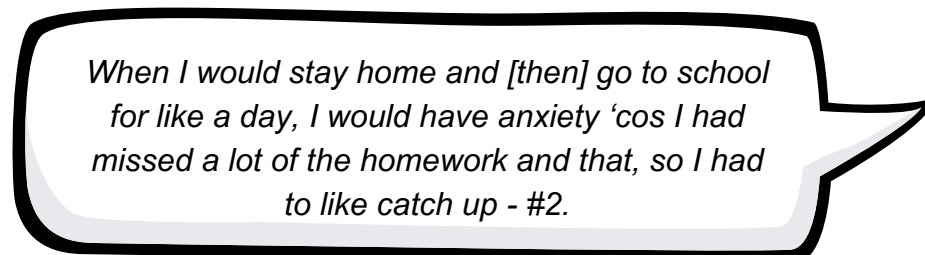
I get to that point [of contemplating suicide] and then they're like "Oh, and you have an exam next week" - #6.

Rigid expectations on attendance were described in the same vein.

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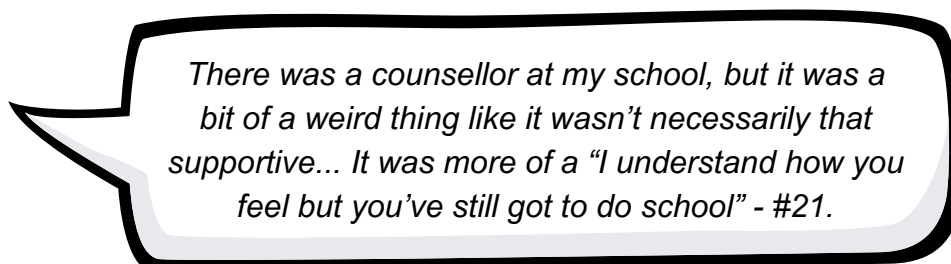
When someone would pass away, school wouldn't care, which hit me hard. So I had to go to school while I was grieving - #1.

For YP, schools often seemed more concerned with academic progress than the well-being of their students. We can see how school does not seem appealing to YP when it can't be accommodating or empathetic towards those who carry emotional burdens on their back. In some cases, spending time away from school might be a sensible choice for a YP who is struggling with mental health. This, however, does not seem to fit with the rigid academic schedules of schools.

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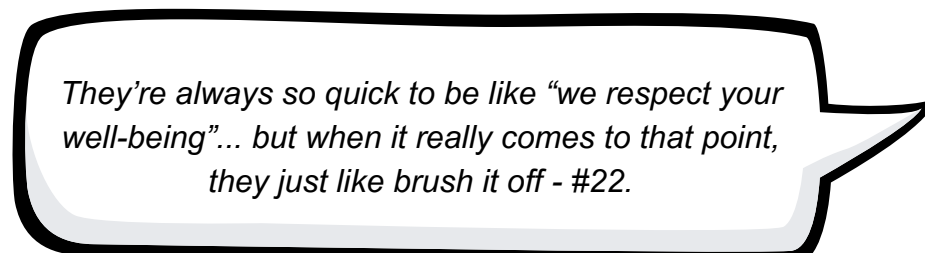
When I would stay home and [then] go to school for like a day, I would have anxiety 'cos I had missed a lot of the homework and that, so I had to like catch up - #2.

Schools were often reported to offer some mental health support – commonly in the form of a school counsellor. YP, however, did not always find this support helpful.

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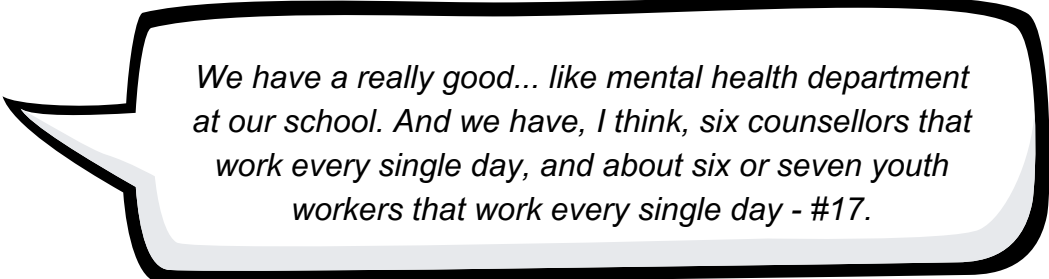
There was a counsellor at my school, but it was a bit of a weird thing like it wasn't necessarily that supportive... It was more of a "I understand how you feel but you've still got to do school" - #21.

Pledges to support student well-being were, at times, felt to be empty promises.

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They're always so quick to be like "we respect your well-being"... but when it really comes to that point, they just like brush it off - #22.

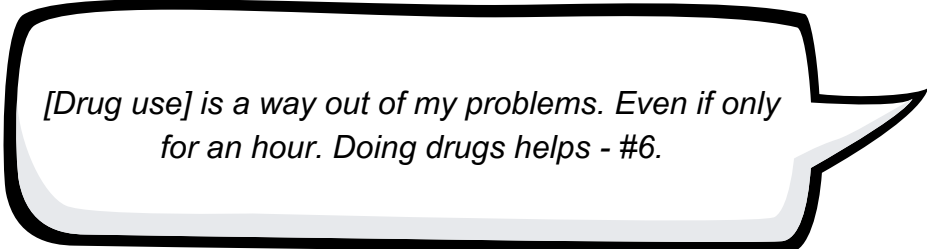
It is telling that, when support services were praised, they were also described as well resourced.



We have a really good... like mental health department at our school. And we have, I think, six counsellors that work every single day, and about six or seven youth workers that work every single day - #17.

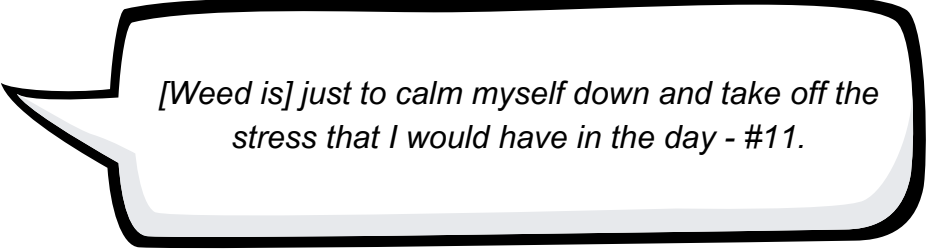
Schools are clearly aware of the challenge of mental health for young people. A recent survey found that supporting vulnerable students, including those with mental health issues, is the top-ranking issue for secondary school principals (Alansari et al, 2023). Our findings suggest that awareness may not be enough to support the YP who are most in need. Investment in a range of support services may be required.

YP reported turning to drugs for relief from emotional loads. Some described drug use as a way of relieving stress and being able to forget about hardships.



[Drug use] is a way out of my problems. Even if only for an hour. Doing drugs helps - #6.

YP saw drug use as justified given the stresses that they faced.



[Weed is] just to calm myself down and take off the stress that I would have in the day - #11.

We can see how this behaviour can lead to absence from school. As one YP pointed out, drug use and school don't mix.

I would skip class to smoke [weed] in the toilets or down to the skate park. I would skip entire weeks. I would get dropped off at school but then go off with friends and smoke weed - #13.

It is important to draw attention to the significance of lacking mental health support here. Young people, having little support, are driven to behaviours that in turn make it more difficult for them to engage with school.

Experiencing boredom at school was repeated across the dataset. This is another way that YP described their well-being not being attended to at school.

*I just get bored of it... Learning is boring for me
- #19*

School was reported to be more engaging in younger years but, as we saw in Theme 1, YP's needs become more acute as they enter adolescence.

*It was fun when I first went... and then once I got older it just started to get boring... less things to do at high school... [it's] more boring being a teenager -
4.*

An insightful point was made by one participant, that a lack of activities at school can lead to troublemaking.

If you don't have anything to do you're going to find something to do and it's probably not going to be a good - #7.

This participant *did* have things to do during breaktime and described the positive effect on their well-being.

We don't get morning tea because we have to train for Polyfest but it's good... it keeps you active and it helps with a lot of things like if you're out at morning tea and you're sitting by yourself and you just have to sit there and do nothing but at the Māori unit kapa haka lets us do something and it makes our brain work. It's really good to keep your brain active. - #7.

When asked what could be done differently at school to better support them, YP mentioned mental health services.

Just the extra support for people that do struggle with mental health issues and to have their say in what they go through... because people that go through mental health problems and mental health struggles... probably need that kind of support, extra around learning - #21.

Addressing boredom was also mentioned.

*Probably something to keep us occupied
- #18.*

One participant suggested that school could be improved by offering activities at lunchtime

Different activities that you could do, like, during lunch, so you don't just have to walk around being bored - #13.

YP were most articulate when describing how being at school often compounded existing mental health difficulties. One implicit meaning of these comments is that schools often do too little to support youth who are battling with mental health.

Theme Summary

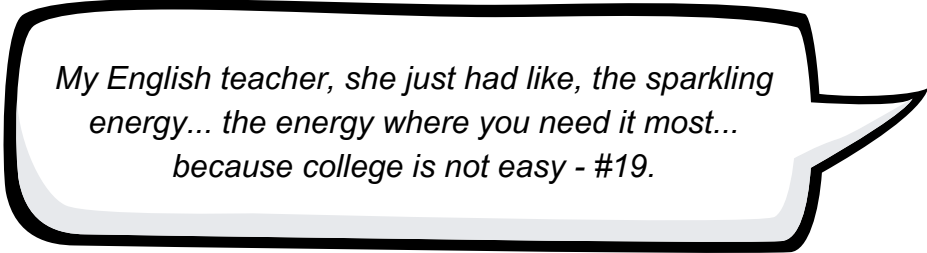
Outtakes and Implications: Participants often struggled with mental and emotional burdens when they walked through the school gates. Furthermore, YP felt that these struggles were only exacerbated at school. They felt that schools did not understand their situation or genuinely address their needs.

The Young Person's Ideal: Accessible mental health resources. Schools have accessible and effective mental health resources to support students' well-being.

Role for Youth Workers: Facilitating access to mental health services. Youth Workers may be able to act as a bridge between students and mental health resources, ensuring students receive the support they need.

Theme 3. Great Expectations: Teachers Should Care About Me

Teachers often featured when YP reflected on significant experiences at school. Teachers were described as impactful for both positive and negative reasons.

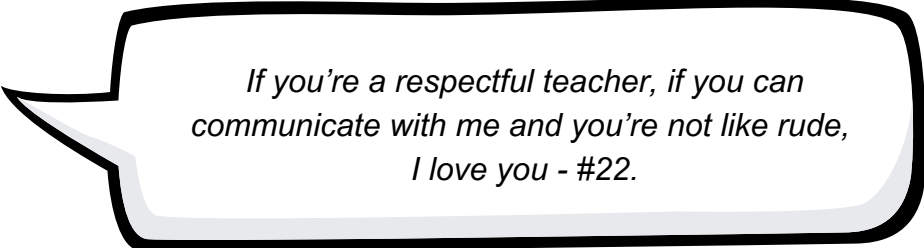


My English teacher, she just had like, the sparkling energy... the energy where you need it most... because college is not easy - #19.

The theme *Great Expectations: Teachers Should Care About Me* explores a pattern across these comments about teachers' influence, good and bad. YP repeatedly expressed an expectation that teachers be caring and attentive to the complex lives of their students. YP desired meaningful relationships with their teachers; being seen and understood by teachers was expected. Experiences with teachers were often described in terms of this relational expectation. "Good" teachers were able to understand and communicate with YP. "Bad" teachers were felt to be less able to see YP for who they really were, including the complex hardships that they often had to deal with.

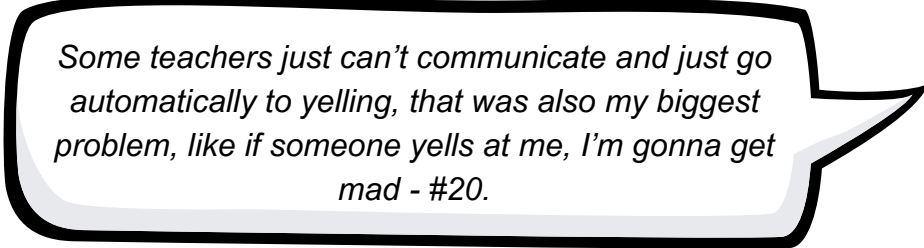
One interesting aspect of this theme is that more attention is paid to teacher's abilities to maintain relationships with students than to teach effectively. This suggests that as a context for engaging in learning, as well as safety, it is important for students to feel cared for and respected. When teachers are perceived to fall short of this expectation, YP are likely to report negative attitudes towards school.

YP desired their interactions with teachers to be fair and respectful. Addressing students directly and politely was a simple way that teachers demonstrated respect.



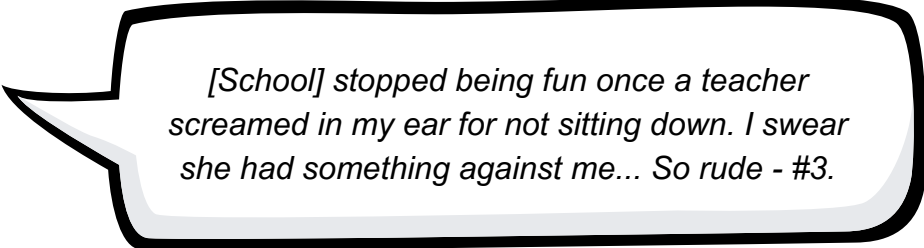
If you're a respectful teacher, if you can communicate with me and you're not like rude, I love you - #22.

By contrast, teachers who came across as grumpy, mean or forceful communicators were blamed for negative experiences at school.



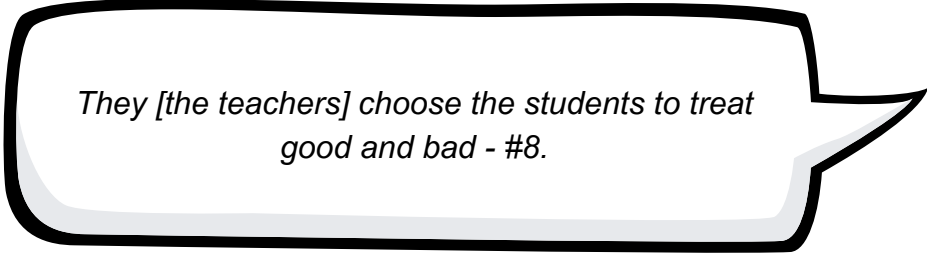
Some teachers just can't communicate and just go automatically to yelling, that was also my biggest problem, like if someone yells at me, I'm gonna get mad - #20.

For YP, disrespectful communication from teachers was often exemplified by overly strict demeanours. Consider this remark about a teacher who was felt to be unfairly strict:



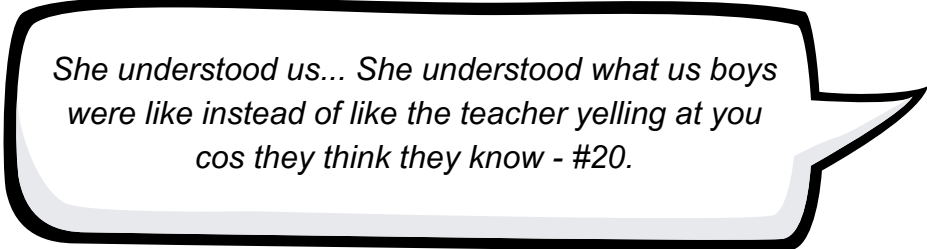
[School] stopped being fun once a teacher screamed in my ear for not sitting down. I swear she had something against me... So rude - #3.

Teachers treating some students differently was another way the expectation for respectful conduct was not met.



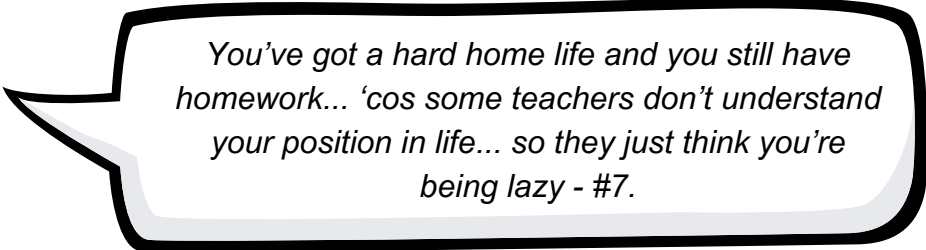
They [the teachers] choose the students to treat good and bad - #8.

YP also expected that teachers be able to relate to them and their circumstances. This meant understanding students' lives outside of school and, importantly, acknowledging their hardships. One YP reported that they found this relatability in a teaching assistant:



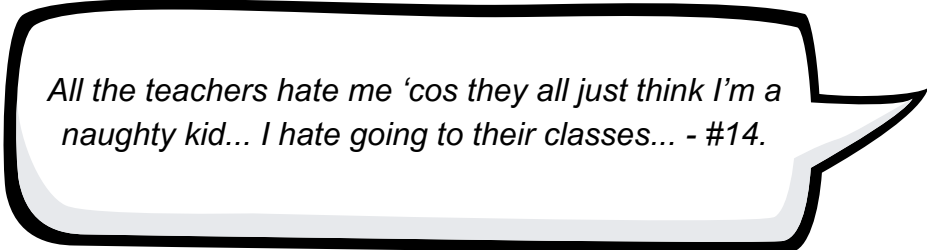
She understood us... She understood what us boys were like instead of like the teacher yelling at you cos they think they know - #20.

Teachers who couldn't recognise or accommodate students dealing with hardships outside of school were criticised for adding stress to already stressful lives.



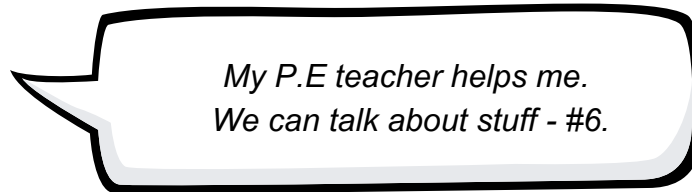
You've got a hard home life and you still have homework... 'cos some teachers don't understand your position in life... so they just think you're being lazy - #7.

YP felt it was unfair for teachers to cast judgement on them without taking time to understand them as individuals. Take, for example, this YP who did not want to be in a classroom with teachers who would not see them for who they were.



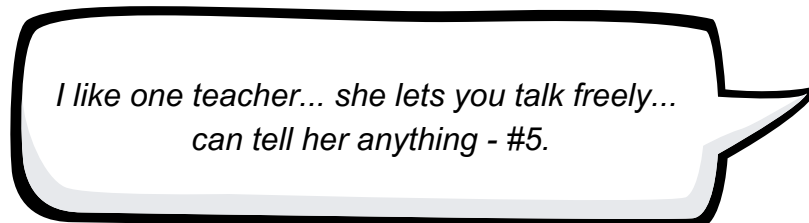
All the teachers hate me 'cos they all just think I'm a naughty kid... I hate going to their classes... - #14.

YP also described examples of relationships with teachers that were personal and caring.



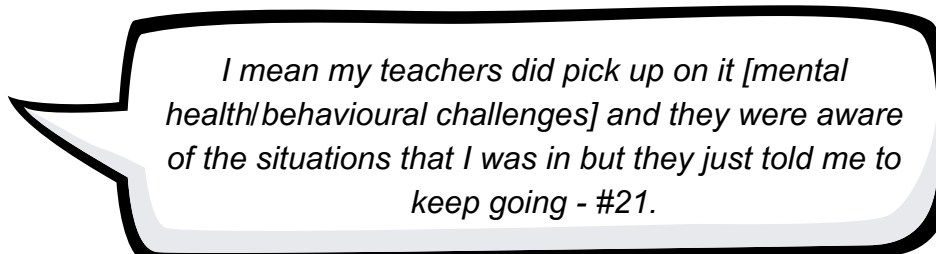
*My P.E teacher helps me.
We can talk about stuff - #6.*

Teachers with whom YP could share their struggles were often mentioned as positive influences at school.



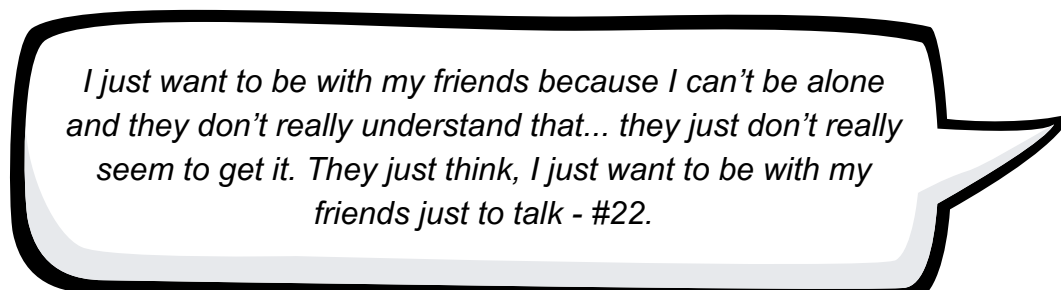
*I like one teacher... she lets you talk freely...
can tell her anything - #5.*

YP reported that being cared for by teachers was especially important when they were struggling with mental health. We can see that this theme overlaps with Theme 2. YP expected teachers to be alert to the mental health challenges that were discussed in Theme 2. Young people expressed disappointment when teachers were not able to or seemed unwilling to provide extra support for those struggling.



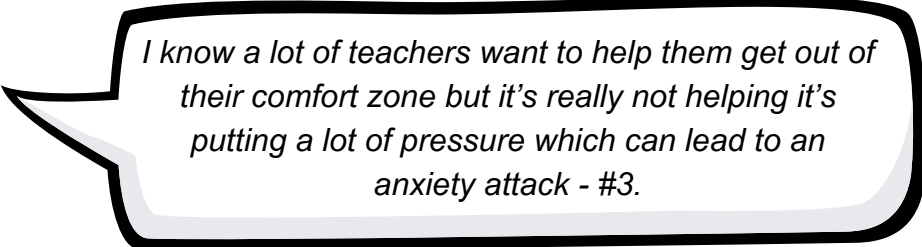
I mean my teachers did pick up on it [mental health/behavioural challenges] and they were aware of the situations that I was in but they just told me to keep going - #21.

Teachers were, at times, depicted as “stuck” in conventional modes of instruction and classroom management that did not cater for those with mental health struggles.



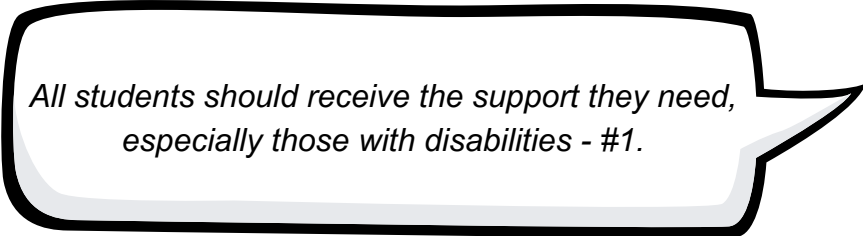
I just want to be with my friends because I can't be alone and they don't really understand that... they just don't really seem to get it. They just think, I just want to be with my friends just to talk - #22.

YP acknowledged that, although teachers might have good intentions for facilitating learning, the emotional needs of students need to be prioritised.



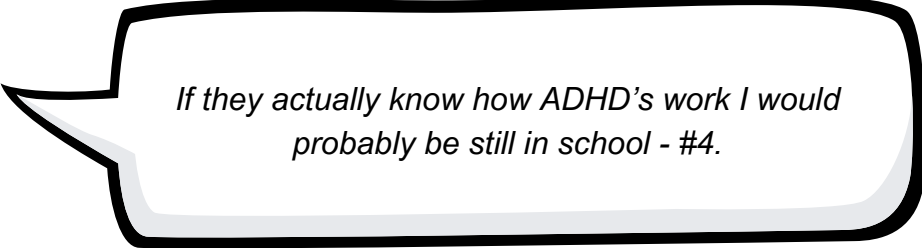
I know a lot of teachers want to help them get out of their comfort zone but it's really not helping it's putting a lot of pressure which can lead to an anxiety attack - #3.

Another way that teachers were expected to care about students was through effective management of diverse learning needs.



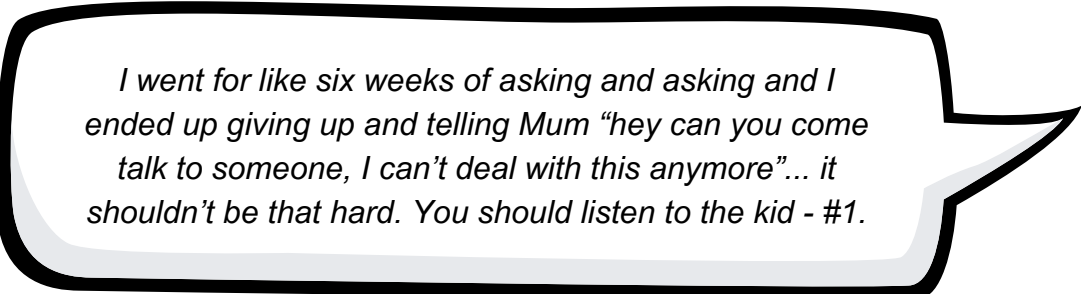
All students should receive the support they need, especially those with disabilities - #1.

YP with learning disabilities expressed disappointment when they felt that teachers were not well-equipped to respond to their needs. This is one area where YP felt unseen by teachers and that the classroom was not a place for them.



If they actually know how ADHD's work I would probably be still in school - #4.

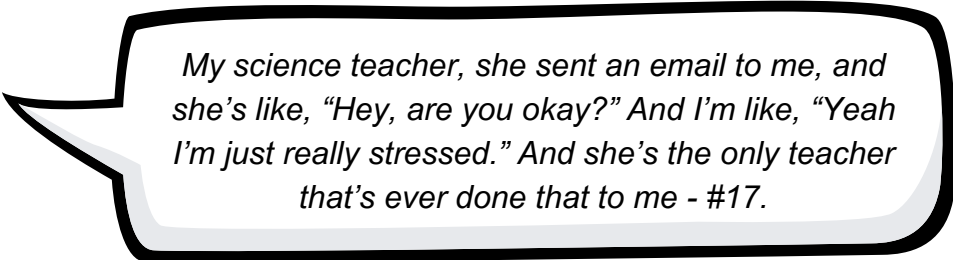
One YP described their repeated requests for extra support for eyesight difficulty going ignored.



I went for like six weeks of asking and asking and I ended up giving up and telling Mum "hey can you come talk to someone, I can't deal with this anymore"... it shouldn't be that hard. You should listen to the kid - #1.

These remarks about experiences of teacher care and resourcing to respond to individual needs is of course only one side of the story. This doesn't mean, however, that no insights can be drawn from them. It is clear that YP want to be seen and their unique challenges understood. When YP feel that they are not shown attention by teachers, they describe wanting to opt out of interactions with their teachers. According to YP, a teacher should be respectful, attentive, and empathetic. This interpretation of the dataset raises the question, do YP have unrealistic expectations for teachers?

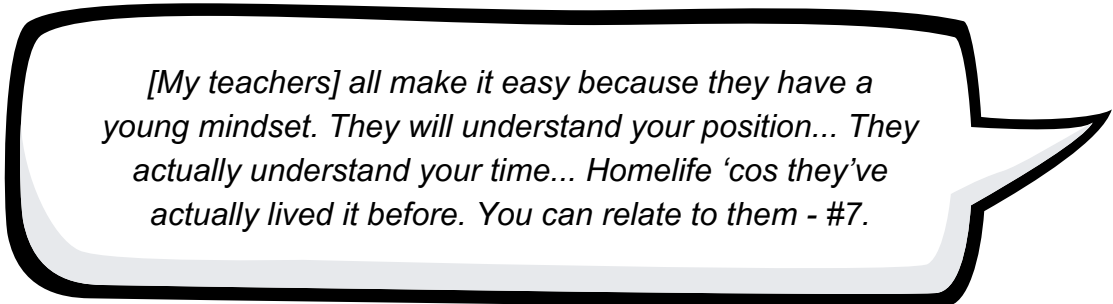
Do YP expect teachers to perform duties that are beyond their responsibilities? Are the expectations of young people unrealistic?



My science teacher, she sent an email to me, and she's like, "Hey, are you okay?" And I'm like, "Yeah I'm just really stressed." And she's the only teacher that's ever done that to me - #17.

Expectations for teachers are certainly high. However, these ideals for teachers do not come from fantasy but from their lived experiences with other quality, caring teachers. Participants repeatedly described teachers from their past that were respectful, attentive and empathetic, suggesting that this changed over time as they progressed into their teenage years and transitioned through the school system.

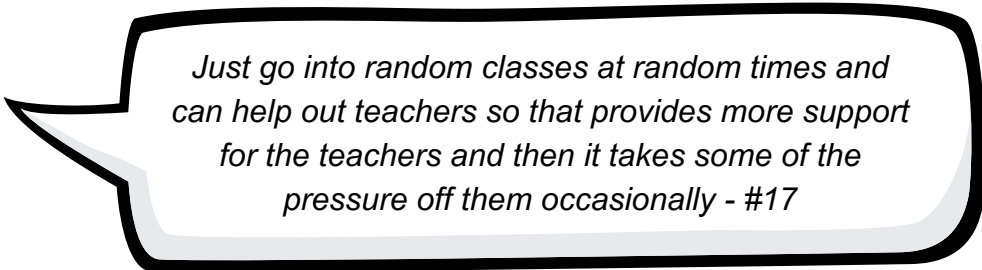
YP often complained that they didn't have enough of this kind of teacher.



[My teachers] all make it easy because they have a young mindset. They will understand your position... They actually understand your time... Homelife 'cos they've actually lived it before. You can relate to them - #7.

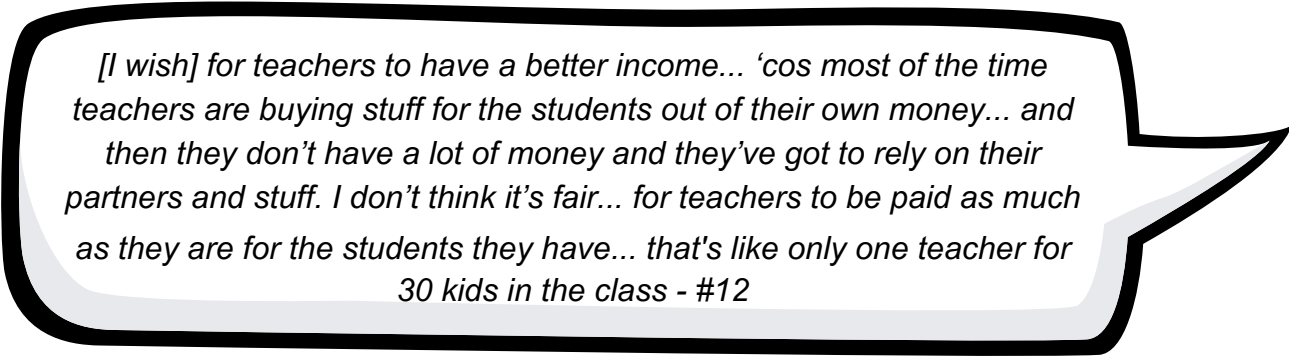
A good teacher, for these YP, does more than help students through classwork. This expectation appears to be borne of experience with teachers who go the extra mile for their students.

When asked what could be done differently in the classroom to support them, YP often empathised with teachers' circumstances. YP felt that teachers were under-resourced. One YP referred to the multiple roles teachers are expected to perform. They saw benefit in having teacher aides that:



Just go into random classes at random times and can help out teachers so that provides more support for the teachers and then it takes some of the pressure off them occasionally - #17

Another YP requested better pay for teachers, suggesting that teacher pay should factor in the money that teachers spend on their students.



[I wish] for teachers to have a better income... 'cos most of the time teachers are buying stuff for the students out of their own money... and then they don't have a lot of money and they've got to rely on their partners and stuff. I don't think it's fair... for teachers to be paid as much as they are for the students they have... that's like only one teacher for 30 kids in the class - #12

Our analysis suggests that YP see teachers as potentially important support. YP acknowledge, however, that teachers themselves need to be resourced and supported if they are to walk alongside their students and have capacity to meet their diverse needs.

Theme Summary

Outtakes and Implications: Participants wanted teachers to be able to be empathetic and supportive. Negative experiences with teachers were a factor in disengagement from school. Participants felt that some teachers did not understand or care about their personal struggles. Teachers have lacked capacity and resourcing to be able to address individual learning difficulties and needs which adds pressure on YP disengaging with school.

The Young Person's Ideal: Engaged and empathetic teachers. Teachers are trained to understand and resourced to support students' individual needs and struggles, fostering a caring and respectful relationship.

Role for Youth Workers: Mentoring and Guidance: The support that YP expect from teachers might also be provided by Youth Workers. Youth Workers can mentor students, help them develop decision-making strategies, set goals for their future, and provide the guidance that students may feel is lacking from their teachers.

Conclusions and Possibilities for Future Research

When youth are given an opportunity to speak, they clearly have much to say. The YP in this study have revealed much about the complexities of attending schools where social interactions, mental health struggles, and relationships with teachers deeply affect engagement and well-being. In this study we have treated these youth voices as a starting point for thinking about educational engagement in Aotearoa. We propose that attending to youth perspectives, such as those expressed in this study, is crucial if we are to understand where our education system fails and where it succeeds.

While they often had much to say about challenges at school and barriers to engagement, YP were less articulate when asked what a Youth Worker could do to support them back into education. This is an indication that these YP struggle to understand what re-engaging with education might look like. This also indicates a lack of re-engagement pathways provided for non-enrolled YP by education providers. One of the key findings of this research is that there is a lack of clear strategies for re-engaging non-enrolled YP. Their absence from school leaves these YP facing the daunting task of “catching up”. For YP who have opted out of school, the pathway back to education is often not clear.

Schools need to utilise attendance services and other interventions to keep youth engaged in schooling while they are still enrolled. Anecdotally, many non-enrolled young people seem to leave school with little to no intervention. This highlights the critical need for proactive engagement strategies similar to those used in workplaces and businesses to prevent loss and improve retention.

In many contexts, the departure of an individual from an institution or service would require careful management to understand underlying issues and implement improvements. For instance, when an employee leaves a workplace, exit interviews are conducted to gather feedback on their experience and identify areas for organisational improvement.

Similarly, businesses losing customers often conduct surveys and adapt their strategies to better meet customer needs and retain their clientele. Therefore, just as in employment and business scenarios, there needs to be proactive measures in place to understand disengagement of students from school.

This research identifies three knowledge gaps regarding educational engagement:

1. There is a knowledge gap in schools' understanding due to the lack of exit interviews and utilising information gathered to adapt and deliver the support these students need.
2. There is a knowledge gap amongst YP about pathways for re-engagement with education and receiving support that meets their needs.
3. There is also a gap in schools' knowledge about effective engagement strategies for YP who need support in that transition back.

Targeted alternative education can reach and support marginalised young people in some areas. However, these pathways have been historically underfunded and under resourced, as well as inconveniently located. Alternative Education providers need to be seen as specialist services, not as a holding bay until YP can be re-engaged.

Furthermore, alternative education is not targeted at key transition points, from primary school to intermediate and from intermediate to secondary school. If YP struggle with this transition, as we have seen many do, there is no alternative pathway or structured support for these students. Our research indicates that there is a need to provide pre-secondary school alternative community-based pathways to engage YP in education.

Future youth voice research could focus more closely on relationships and bullying in schools. Enabling student leadership, agency, and voice, is one of the nine core elements of an effective whole-school approach to preventing and responding to bullying (Bullying-Free NZ, n.d.). Our research suggests that young people who are not enrolled in school also have much to offer when looking for youth perspectives on bullying in schools. The YP in this study often struggled to articulate ideas for the prevention of bullying and better peer relations. Different methods of data collection, such as story completion (Clarke et al, 2019), might be considered.

Future research might look closer at youth perspectives on sufficient mental health support. Many YP in this study reported that the mental health support at their school was not effective. A more targeted study of youth experiences with mental health support in schools should offer helpful insights for school leaders who want to offer better support.

YP in this study expressed high expectations for teachers. We found that these high expectations were often grounded in positive experiences with caring, attentive, and respectful teachers. It would be interesting to hear from teachers about how they understand their role in relation to these qualities. Would teachers like to be supported more to provide this kind of support to students? Or do teachers think this support should be provided by others with more relevant training. What role do teachers think Youth Workers could play in schools? This research brings questions such as these into focus.

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