



Young people and caregivers' perspectives on truancy and non-enrolment

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Executive Summary

Within the Christchurch region, Māori young people are more likely to be non-enrolled (NE), than young people from other ethnic backgrounds. The Attendance Service operating in this region (Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi, K3 Service) identified this as an area of concern, and was granted research funding by the Ministry of Education to investigate the possible reasons why Māori young people are more likely to become NE.

A qualitative research project was undertaken during 2016. Over a period of several months, K3 staff (kaiāwhina) conducted 40 interviews with 10 NE young people who identified as Māori, and 10 young people who identified as non-Māori. A caregiver of each of the young person interviewed was also interviewed by kaiāwhina. Kaiāwhina conducted interviews with participants who were known to them as part of their regular caseload. The young people interviewed were either currently identified as NE, or had been NE within the last 12 months. Interviews were analysed thematically, and themes between the four groups were compared and contrasted.

Young people and caregivers expressed a number of similar ideas about schooling and experiences of truancy and being NE. These included a desire to connect and engage with learning, the need for effective communication and positive relationships at school with teachers and other students, and the related theme of bullying.

Regarding young people specifically, perhaps the most significant theme to emerge was relationships (whanaungatanga). Relationships with teachers, other students (particularly bullying), caregivers, and pastoral care personnel were all important in determining the extent to which young people felt connected at school. More non-Māori than Māori young people indicated that they accessed pastoral care support. Many young people indicated that bullying was a significant issue and they felt that schools weren't doing enough to address this. It was also clear from the findings that most young people wanted to engage in learning. Some young people struggled to receive the help they needed, and this led to disengagement in classes.

Caregivers from both groups wanted young people in their care to attend school and experience success. They felt schools could make some curriculum changes to become more relevant and practical; and both Māori and non-Māori caregivers commented on a desire for schools to become more culturally relevant to different ethnic groups. Many

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caregivers wanted schools to communicate more regularly with them; interestingly, Māori caregivers reported more support from key personnel compared with non-Māori. Some caregivers expressed concern about the possibility of prosecution. In some cases where bullying was an issue they felt that schools had failed to create a safe place, yet they were the ones who could be prosecuted for not being able to keep a young person at school. A number of caregivers expressed concerns around bullying and the ways in which this prevented young people from attending school.

The caregivers interviewed for this study raised some significant issues regarding access of support for themselves and young people in their care. It is recommended that further research be undertaken to explore caregivers' perspectives in greater detail. The second area requiring further investigation is bullying intervention and prevention strategies, particularly links to truancy and non-enrolment. This research suggests that where bullying wasn't addressed in schools, young people became disengaged. It is also recommended that schools reconsider the ways in which they are communicating with caregivers in order to meet their requirements in this area, and to increase the likelihood of productive engagement.

1. Background and Rationale

It is well understood that engagement with education is needed in order for young people to transition successfully into adulthood. A recent Ministry of Education (MOE) publication reported that “chronic truancy is also a strong predictor of negative outcomes in later life including violence, delinquency, substance abuse, unemployment and early parenting”.¹

Statistics collated by Te Ora Hou's Attendance Service (K3) during the 2014 school year highlighted an over-representation in the numbers of Māori who were classified Non-Enrolled (NE). Most NE students have a history of truancy, prior to becoming non-enrolled. The number of NE young people who were referred to K3 during the 2014 school year totalled 490, of which 31% or 154 students identified as Māori. These figures indicate that young Māori appear to be withdrawn from school rolls at a disproportionate rate. In Christchurch approximately 15% of the youth population identify as Māori. The over-representation of Māori as NE, is similar to other non-attendance statistics. For example, in 2015 nationally, Māori young people had the lowest percentage of regular school attendance at 56.7%, compared to other ethnicities.² It is unclear why Māori are more likely to become NE, so the purpose of this study was to investigate this further.

1.1. K3 Attendance Service

Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi K3 Attendance Service (K3) provides state and state-integrated schools in Canterbury, Marlborough, Tasman and the West Coast with attendance services. This is an optional MOE funded support service for schools which is an amalgamation of the previous District Truancy Service and the Non Enrolled Truancy Service. In the case of NE young people, MOE makes referrals directly to K3. The greater Christchurch region is supported directly by Te Ora Hou K3 staff, and the Te Ora Hou

¹ Ministry of Education (2013). *Non-enrolled students*. Retrieved from: <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/indicators/main/student-engagement-participation/non-enrolled-students>.

² Ministry of Education. (2015). *Attendance in New Zealand schools 2015*. Retrieved from: http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/173796/Attendance-in-New-Zealand-Schools-2015.pdf.

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kaupapa³ strongly influences policy and practice, with a particular focus on cultural responsive engagement. The name K3 is an example of this kaupapa in action. The 'K' of K3 refers to koha (generosity), which is one of the central values in the Circle of Courage.⁴ The Circle of Courage is a youth development model which forms the basis for Te Ora Hou's model of practice. The '3' refers to whānau, community, and education: three gifts which are essential to the healthy development of a young person.

The role of kaiāwhina (K3 Attendance Service staff) is to:

...support schools, parents/family/whānau, iwi, Pasifika groups, the community and inter-agency services to improve learner attendance and ensure a seamless, collaborative, effective, efficient and culturally responsive service for students and schools.⁵

A relational approach to engaging with young people, caregivers and stakeholders is a key strength in the work of kaiāwhina. They do this in order to work in culturally appropriate ways, and so that they may access information sensitively and respectfully. This practice is consistent with the concept of 'whakawhanaungatanga' which is described by numerous researchers and practitioners including Hall, Hornby and MacFarlane.⁶ In their work with Māori families, the researchers explored the "mechanisms involved for engaging Māori families in their child's education". Drawing upon the work of Durie,⁷ they proposed a cultural framework be adopted to bridge the divide or ease the "tensions that exist between Māori families and educational institutions". Durie argues that "Whanaungatanga, building relationships is a critical whānau function that contributes to human potential and to successful engagement

³ Kaupapa in this context refers to the cultural practices of Te Ora Hou including the philosophical underpinnings.

⁴ Brendtro, L., Brokenleg, M. & Van Brockern, S. (2002). *Reclaiming youth at risk: Our hope for our future*. Solution Tree Press, Bloomington.

⁵ Information retrieved from: <http://www.toho.org.nz/k3attendanceservice>

⁶ Hall, N., Hornby, G. & MacFarlane, S. (2015). Enabling school engagement for Māori families in New Zealand. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24, p. 3038-3046.

⁷ Durie, M. (2006). *Whānau, education and Māori potential*. Retrieved from: <https://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/fms/Te%20Mata%20O%20Te%20Tau/Publications%20-%20Mason/HTML%20Charcode.pdf>.

outside the whānau". It is through this principle of whanaungatanga that kaiāwhina work to bridge the communication divide between schools and young people.

In their practice, kaiāwhina aim to make a meaningful connection with the young person and their caregiver so that they can work towards an appropriate outcome. In some cases this may result in enrolment in a different education option such as Alternative Education. For the young person and their caregivers, kaiāwhina facilitate communication between the schools and other key stakeholders. Some NE cases arise, or are more difficult to resolve, because of a breakdown in relationships between school and family. While K3 is contracted by the MOE, kaiāwhina work in an independent, supportive role. Being a step removed from MOE and from schools means that kaiāwhina may be seen by families as an advocate for them, and a mediator between the family and the school.

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2. Purpose and Scope of the Study

2.1. Aims of the Study

The purpose of this research was to examine the over-representation of Māori NE young people, in comparison to non-Māori within the Christchurch region. There were three main research questions guiding this study:

1. What are the main causes of non-enrolment for Māori, and are the issues different to those impacting non-Māori students?
2. If the underlying issues/causes are the same between Māori/non-Māori, why are they apparently having a greater impact on Māori?
3. What are the practice and policy implications and how will this information provide opportunities to promote best practice for key stakeholders, including kaiāwhina, other Attendance Service providers, MOE, and schools?

2.2. Definition of Key Terms

Young person/young people: Throughout this report the terms 'young person' and 'young people' will be used more frequently than 'student' or 'students'. While student(s) typically refers to the young person in direct relationship to learning and schooling, a young person or young people, signifies that: (1) a young person exists in relationship with their whānau, peers, and the wider community; (2) that these relationships are primary and that schooling is in fact mostly secondary; and (3) that their needs are developmentally holistic and relate to whānau, peers, community; rather than limited to just schooling matters.

Non-Māori: In this study we use the term non-Māori for all young people who did not identify as Māori. This includes those whom identify as New Zealand European, European and/or Pacific Island ethnicity.

Attendance Service: The Attendance Service is an amalgamation of the Non-Enrolled Truancy Service (NETS) and the District Truancy Service into one integrated services. The key aim of the Attendance Service is to "support schools, parents/family/whānau, iwi, Pasifika groups, the community and interagency services to improve learner

attendance and to ensure a seamless collaborative, effective, efficient and culturally responsive service for students and schools".⁸

Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi: The Attendance Service provider for the Westland, Nelson, Marlborough and Canterbury regions is Te Ora Hou. Te Ora Hou is a network of faith-based youth and community development organisations working with young people, their whānau and communities in a number of places across Aotearoa. Te Ora Hou has been operating in New Zealand for nearly 40 years. During this time, hundreds of people connected to Te Ora Hou have led many different projects and services, working with thousands of young people and their families.⁹

Non-Enrolled (NE): Non-Enrolled is a term used to describe a child or young person aged between 6 and 16 years who is not enrolled in education.

Caregivers: In this report we use the term caregivers rather than parents. In this context we were interested in interviewing the primary caregiver – the one who was providing primary support in a time of high need. This could be an aunty, uncle, grandparent, foster carer, or natural parent. In some cases, this could be a family friend.

Kaiāwhina: Kaiāwhina is the title used for K3 Attendance Service workers.

2.3. Methodology

In this qualitative case study, kaiāwhina invited NE young people and their caregivers to participate in one-on-one interviews to gain an understanding of their educational experiences and their experiences of being NE; or having a young person in their care who was classified NE. In depth interviews were carried out to gain a detailed account of these experiences. Thematic analysis was then used to analyse the data. Kaiāwhina conducted 40 interviews: 10 with NE young people who identified as Māori, and 10 with young people who identified as non-Māori. A caregiver of each young person was also interviewed by kaiāwhina in a one-on-one context.

⁸ Bruce, J. (2018). *Dis/Engagement in secondary schools: Towards truancy prevention*. Report for Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi. Available at: <http://teorahou.org.nz>

⁹ Information retrieved from: <http://teorahou.org.nz/about-us/>

2.4. Culturally Responsive Research

Culturally responsive practice is a critical part of the kaupapa of Te Ora Hou work, and all staff have undertaken and/or are undertaking training in te reo and tikanga Māori. Te Ora Hou was committed to ensuring that this research project was also culturally responsive. The research team, including K3 staff, approached the Ngāi Tahu Consultation and Engagement Group (NTCEG) for their support and advice. NTCEG were in agreement that the research on NE young people was a very worthwhile and interesting project with potential benefits for Māori communities. The NTCEG also felt that there may be Māori researchers in their organisation who would be interested in the findings, or in sharing some expertise in this important area. Relevant culturally responsive practices were employed during the data collection process by kaiāwhina, who carried out the interviews.

2.5. Data Collection and Analysis

2.5.1. Interview participants

The young people and the caregivers invited to participate had been or were currently NE within the Christchurch region. All young people were known to kaiāwhina and were selected because they had an existing relationship with kaiāwhina. In addition, their relationships with kaiāwhina extended to the young people's caregivers who were working (or had worked) together during the time of being NE.

2.5.2. Young people participants

In total 20 unstructured interviews of varying duration were conducted with young people. Of the 10 young people who agreed to be interviewed and who identified as non-Māori (including two young people who identified as Dutch), five were female and five were male. Of the 10 young Māori who agreed to be interviewed (including two whose caregivers identified as either Samoan or with some Samoan heritage), seven were male and three were female.

Young people were invited to participate in unstructured interviews with kaiāwhina who already knew them well, and in a quiet place of their choosing. It was hoped that this would help young people to feel safe and comfortable in the interview setting, in order to create a more open context for conversation and to encourage young people to voice their experiences in greater detail. Kaiāwhina employed an unstructured

interview method which enabled them the flexibility to be guided by the young person's story. This style of interviewing meant that there were general topics and conversation starters. The interview topic guidelines were provided to kaiāwhina and these included the following:

Topic starters and conversation ideas:

- How old are you?
- What intermediate or high school did you last attend and were you zoned for this school?
- Have you attended any other secondary schools in Christchurch or elsewhere?
- Method of transport to school? What ethnicity do you identify with?
- If Māori, do you know your hapu or iwi?
- What did you like about being at school?
- Can you give me some examples of what was okay or what was not okay when you were at school? (e.g. of topics for discussion: friends, bullying, relationships with others).
- Have you been doing any NCEA credits? If so, did you choose your NCEA subjects or did someone choose them for you?
- Did you do any sports or other interests outside of school? E.g. sports on a Saturday morning? If not, is there a sport you would like to have been playing?
- Did you like your teachers, and if so what did you like about them? If not, what did you not like about them?
- Did you feel like your teachers like you and support you? If so, how did you know, if not how did you know? (E.g. support from counselors, youth workers, teachers OR no support at all).
- What do you and your mates like doing at school? Do you hang out after school?
- What about homework - did you like doing homework? Was there a quiet space for you to do your homework at home? Did you have someone you could ask for help if you needed it? (E.g. curriculum and lessons: understanding the work; struggling to read or write; no understanding instructions; what learning activities worked well/didn't work well?).
- In the classroom, do you ask for help to understand something? Do you feel okay about asking for help? If not, why?
- When you hang out with your mates, do you talk about school, if so, what do you talk about and if not, why do you not talk about school? (E.g. school hours, school rules, etc.)
- What does your whānau/family say about school, when you talk about school?
- If you don't talk about school, why do you think that is?
- Do you miss being at school? Do you miss your friends or the teachers?
- What experience about school haven't we talked about that you would like to discuss?

2.5.3. Caregiver participants

Unstructured interviews were also conducted with a total of 20 caregivers whose young people were currently or previously NE. Of these 20 participants, ten identified as non-Māori (nine as New Zealand European, two as New Zealand European and Samoan, and one who identified as Dutch). This cohort consisted of nine females and one male. For the participants who identified as Māori, seven were female and three were male. Five caregivers indicated they were from North Island iwi (including Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Ruanui, Ngāpuhi, and Ngāti Ruapani). The remaining participants either identified their iwi as Ngāi Tahu, or were unsure.

The caregivers were invited by kaiāwhina to participate and share their experiences of parenting young people who were identified as NE, and all with a history of truancy.

Topic guides for discussion included:

- Ethnicity/background
- Thoughts and feelings about your experiences with the young person at school?
- How important is it in your family that young people in your care attend school regularly?
- Do you feel that you and the young person are supported by the school (teachers, pastoral care, guidance counsellors)?
- Have you had any assistance from community organisations, agencies that come into the school or your friends?
- What routines do you and young people follow that makes going to school easier? e.g. breakfast together, doing homework after school etc.
- How organised do you feel on a school morning?
- Do you talk to the young person about why they don't want to go to school? If so, what do you talk about? If you don't talk about school, why do you think that is? If not, why not?
- Does the thought of being prosecuted for your young person not attending school concern you? If not, why not?
- What would you change about school if you could that would make going to school easier for your young person? What recommendations or advice you would like to pass on to the school (principal, teachers and so on) that would help your young person feel more engaged in the school environment?

2.5.4. Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed before data analysis was undertaken. Data was analysed using the method of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data was coded by interview question, and then by theme. Data across the four

participant groups was compared and contrasted to determine similarities and differences. Data was also compared and contrasted within the four participant groups.

2.5.5. Ethics, Challenges and Limitations of the Study

Ethical permission was granted by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee for Educational Research and all policy, procedures and guidelines were followed to ensure ethical research was undertaken. To ensure anonymity, some demographics and circumstances from participants have been changed in the reporting of the findings. Names of participants are not used in order to protect anonymity. Kaiāwhina were informed that if young people disclosed information which deemed them at risk of harming themselves, or where someone else may be known to be harmed, then the K3 Attendance Service Manager was to be informed. If young people became upset during the interview, then kaiāwhina were to be reassuring and calm, and ensure that appropriate referrals were made and/or support networks and whānau informed following the interview, if appropriate.

The study was limited by the number of young people and caregivers interviewed. Given the complexities facing NE young people, it was not surprising that kaiāwhina struggled to find young people who were willing to participate. Furthermore, where young people were interviewed, they were encouraged to share only information that they felt comfortable sharing with kaiāwhina. While understandable and ethically appropriate, it is also worth noting that vital information may have been withheld.

3. Findings

3.1. Young People

The following themes emerged from interviews with NE young people: relationships with teachers, views of what good support looks and feels like, young peoples' discussions with caregivers about school, and things young people would like to change about school. Relationships with others (teachers, caregivers, support personnel, and issues of bullying) all presented as critical factors influencing the level of engagement that young people had with school. Interestingly, there were no significant differences in responses from Māori and non-Māori young people except in one area. Some non-Māori reported more positive pastoral care support experiences than Māori. It wasn't clear from this study why this may have been the case.

3.1.1. Relationships with teachers

Not surprisingly, relationships with teachers emerged as a significant theme. Some spoke of enjoying their teachers, particularly their Physical Education and Music teachers at secondary school. Others spoke of not enjoying their teachers at secondary school but indicated that they had good relationships with their teachers at primary and intermediate school. For example:

"Mr T was always there when we needed him".

"I liked one of my teachers at [name of school omitted] my form teacher she was also my English teacher".

"Yep, all of them teachers they encouraged you there".

"Liked my form teacher, he let us work out problems in our own way and let us talk to other students and stuff [this was in a Maths Class]".

"Liked only one teacher Art, Māori, and PE sometimes".

There were however, some young people from both groups that did not enjoy their teachers and this is highlighted below:

"Didn't really like the teachers at high school, didn't talk to me as much as other kids".

"No, not at [name of high school omitted]".

"Just...a dick and bossy an everything".

[name of high school omitted] "full of shit, lots of rules".

"Not really, teachers weren't good there, they weren't good at all".

For young people who spoke of not enjoying their teachers or their time spent at high school, the element of feeling invisible becomes apparent in the discussion below as young people voice their experiences relating to classroom dynamics.

3.1.2. Views of what good support looks and feels like for young people

Non-Māori young people who sought support from pastoral care personnel (e.g. social workers, youth workers, guidance counsellors) within the school environment spoke positively of the support they received:

"I got some counselling, that was helpful".

"The guidance counsellor was alright, sometimes".

"Yeah, they were real like chilled and understanding and that [name of school omitted]".

But for some young Māori, their experiences with teachers paint a different picture. For example:

"Both teachers and students bullied".

"They [teachers] just ask a question and then act like why don't you know that, they wouldn't help me with it".

"They didn't want me in their class so they kept referring me out".

In a continuation of how young people felt about their teachers, a question the researchers determined was important was whether young people felt comfortable putting up their hand up in class to ask the teacher for clarification on a topic they were learning. We felt this question provided an indication of how much learning support they might receive in class. The responses to this question did not vary between the two

groups with most young people feeling confident about putting their hand up in class.

For example:

"Yell it out".

"Yep, happy to put my hand up".

"Sometimes if the teachers happy and stuff".

"Most of my questions and answers were smart arsed".

"I would sooner figure out the answer for myself".

"Yeah, I would always ask heaps of questions".

However, for a minority, they were not quite so comfortable putting up there hand in class:

"Yep, [but then] I started not to, they weren't helping me, jus...like a waste of time".

"Nope, yeah I just don't have the confidence".

"Sometimes, I'd just be too shy, try and work it out myself if I couldn't just sit there".

"No, because the majority of the time I was never right".

"Don't put my hand up just sit and be quiet".

The relevance of the question of whether they put their hands up in class links with the next questions related to homework, such as: did they complete homework? Did they have a quiet place to do their homework? And did they have someone who could help them with it? When both groups were questioned about homework, there was no marked difference in their responses, but as shown below their voices highlight the struggles they experienced to complete their homework:

"Only in Science but I struggled so I never did it, no real help with it at home".

"No, I couldn't do it although my brother [name omitted] would help".

"Did all my work in class".

"It's boring but I did do it".

"Nah we didn't really get told if we got homework or not it was like we were meant to be on the internet and looking at our files everyday...I didn't know where to go look for it".

"A little bit, and did it".

"I guess so, favourite subject Maths".

"Yes, didn't know it".

A small number of young people from both groups did not engage at all in homework. For example:

"Nope, I didn't do homework".

"No not really, got it sometimes, didn't do it just lazy".

"I never got homework".

"I've never had homework in my life, it's for school".

Evidenced from their voices is the motivation for the majority to do their homework, and the confidence to ask questions during class time. The voices highlighted above, suggest that young people do want to learn and complete the work set out in class. However, many of the young people indicated that one of the main barriers to learning was receiving adequate learning support from their teachers.

3.1.3. What young people would like to change about school

At the conclusion of each of their interviews all young people were asked *'what would you change about school if you could?'* Many wanted their education to be of primary importance and wished that schools didn't focus as much on issues such as wearing *"the correct uniform"*. One Māori male requested teachers *"to focus more on my education and not my uniform and to listen"*.

Relationships with teachers continued here as a theme. As one young person reflected, she wanted teachers *"to just help me with my learning just help me with everything I needed"*. One young Māori male spoke of wanting to be noticed instead of *"being invisible"* to teachers; while others spoke of teachers not knowing their names after they had been at the same school for years.

Both Māori and non-Māori young people spoke of the need for objectivity surrounding the issues of bullying. Some spoke of the need for schools, particularly *“deans to listen to both sides”* of the conflict instead of blaming just one person or alternatively doing nothing about it. In the instances of bullying that were discussed, one young person mentioned *“she had to leave school without getting any closure.”*

In response to a question asked about what she struggled with at school a young Māori female replied *“bullying”*; and in response to being asked whether she was bullied by students or teachers she replied *“It was both”*. Similarly, one Māori young male spoke of not only being bullied but being a bully himself *“yeah I got bullied and bullied people”*. A young Māori male when asked the same question replied *“bullying was not okay”*, and that teachers were more supportive of his learning *“but not bullying”*. A non-Māori young female had a similar response when asked that *“bullying was a big thing”* and that *“no it wasn't sorted at all”*.

3.1.4. Young peoples' discussions with caregivers about school

The majority of young people from both groups had ongoing discussions with their caregivers about the importance of attending school. One young male likened his mother to a *“lecturer”* as she reminded him so often about the need to go to school. Other caregivers reminded young people to *“just behave”* and that *“school is good for you, school will get you where you want to go”*. One young person's caregiver told her *“to fix [her] attendance”*, and this was expressed with concern as she felt supported by her family.

For others, some of the responses are not quite as supportive:

“Doesn't talk about school at home”.

“I don't [talk] about school to any of them, they just tell me to go to school”.

“Trying to force it into my head, I need to go to school”.

“Yeah stay in school”.

3.1.5. Summary of young peoples' experiences

Across these themes there were some strong messages that did emerge from both groups. Relationships with teachers, other students (particularly bullying), caregivers,

and pastoral care personnel were all important in determining the extent to which young people felt connected, or able to stay connected in schooling. It was also clear from the findings that most young people did really try to engage by asking for help, and doing their homework. Some young people struggled to receive the help that they needed, and this led to disengagement for them. Many young people indicated that bullying was a significant issue, and in many instances they felt that schools weren't doing enough to address this problem. There was only one area where young people differed in their views: non-Māori spoke more about accessing pastoral care support than Māori young people. The reasons for this were unclear and further research is recommended.

3.2. Caregivers

Interrelated themes that emerged from the interviews with caregivers were: discussions with young people on the importance of schooling; caregivers' experiences of support from schools and agencies; caregivers' experiences surrounding engagement with school personnel; and recommendations from caregivers on what secondary schools could do better for NE young people.

3.2.1. Discussions with young people on the importance of school

In response to the questions on how caregivers valued education nearly all responded that school was very important for their young people. One caregiver spoke of engaging her young person in regular conversations which focused on asking *"what's going on at school, why he doesn't like it, what can we do to make it easier and better, then discuss it with the teachers, but we still don't get any support"*. Most caregivers had similar responses:

"She's going nowhere in life if she's got no education".

"It's important at least until she's 16".

"It's only 14 years of your life then you can go play".

"Huge, we were always on his case".

"Firm believer that if you're not going to excel at school you're not going to excel".

"Very we talk about it all the time".

"Important really important".

"Told him from the very beginning when he first started school that education was important".

"Important, because you have to be qualified for the majority of jobs".

It was evident from the responses given that caregivers placed a high value on education. They wanted their young people to participate because they believed this would lead to success later in life.

3.2.2. Experiences of support from schools and agencies

To explore caregivers' views on their experiences of school engagement, we asked them to tell us about the level of support they had received from the school or an external agency. Their responses were many and varied. The analysis revealed a disparity between Māori and non-Māori regarding the perception and level of support received from schools. Māori caregivers reported greater levels of support than non-Māori caregivers; although the reasons for this are unclear.

Overall, out of the ten Māori caregivers only one spoke of not being happy with the support she received from schools; she spoke of feeling supported at *"primary school, but high school was a bit different"*. The remainder, who reported good levels of support, gave the following responses:

"yeah they were pretty good, like they did everything to help [name omitted] with his education, trying to get him to engage more, activities at school...The principal, I found really helpful, had a few meetings as well as the teachers regularly and the guidance counsellor as well and a whole lot of other agencies."

"they've been really good, any little problem that arose I was down at the school"

"he had heaps, like the deans, they were on his case all the time"

"they were supportive, he had a lot of support from the DP and the principal"

"we had good contact"

“the principal I found really helpful...had a few meetings as well as teachers regularly and the guidance counselor, a whole lot of agencies and we got what they call the Māori programme out there, like getting into the army”.

In contrast while the majority of Māori provided positive responses regarding the level of support they received, only two out of the ten non-Māori caregivers were happy with the support given. One caregiver recalled that, *“It was good yeah, no it was good, until they gave up on him at the end of it”*; and another caregiver spoke of how the school had tried to help her daughter *“yeah, they tried to help her yep”*. But the majority of non-Māori caregivers spoke of feeling frustrated over the lack of support they received from schools, particularly for young people requiring specialist support. For example, one caregiver found she experienced negative relationships with the dean over her Māori son. She wanted her son tested for a possible learning disability but they wouldn't test him and attributed any problems to bad behaviour. She believed that this lack of support resulted in her son being labelled a troublemaker, and he was constantly being referred out of class. She spoke of how her son would be at school sitting outside a class and yet would be marked absent. She was very proactive with the school but more often felt she was ignored.

Another non-Māori caregiver thought her young person's time at school *“sucked arse”*. She believed that she had *“no support...no nothing”*; she labelled the school *“fucken useless”*. Similarly, another caregiver, said there was not enough help and that more options were needed. Similarly:

“I asked for help, but they just shut us out and then I look like a bad parent, I tried everything to get [name omitted] back into school but they just weren't interested”.

Another caregiver had the school counsellor hang up on her a few times. She recalls:

“I kept ringing back [name omitted] was getting bullied, the Year 9 dean was supposed to ring but she said she forgot cos we got off on the wrong foot over shoes”.

Other caregivers' responses suggest there was a lack of communication with teachers and staff. For example, one caregiver found that it took two years for her child to be diagnosed with a learning disability when she had had the same teacher for two years. After receiving three years of specialist support, the secondary school her daughter

attended promised her additional support (funding) but nothing eventuated. This made it very difficult for her daughter to learn and keep up in class.

From the findings of this study, there appears to be a disparity in the perceived level of support between Māori and non-Māori caregivers. While Māori caregivers reported higher levels of support, non-Māori caregivers spoke of their struggles to receive support. It is not clear from this study why this disparity exists. Further research into this issue is recommended.

3.2.3. Experiences surrounding engagement with school personnel

In some instances, the voices of caregivers and their young people suggested that the ways school personnel communicated with them was unhelpful and left caregivers and young people feeling frustrated and angry. Caregivers spoke of a lack of opportunities available to engage effectively with their young persons' dean, teacher or form teacher. Caregivers also spoke of the difficulties they had with the ways school made contact with them, advising that the young person was no longer on the school roll. Caregivers from both groups recalled how they were informed by MOE by email when it was too late to do anything about it.

One caregiver spoke of her frustration over a meeting she had with her son's dean. The caregiver felt that:

"The dean had no idea what was happening and basically just made a whole range of excuses about the changes at the school, she had no idea of who [child's name omitted] was or any plan in place to help him and then two weeks after that meeting we got the letter from MOE saying he was no longer enrolled at high school. We just saw it seemed a quick fix just to flick him out, get him out see you later..."

Another caregiver spoke of wanting to keep his daughter at school (in a bullying related incident), yet his experiences suggested he had very little success doing so:

"They're the adults...they should take a step back and look at the situation. I approached the Board twice but [name omitted] got kicked out of there".

Another caregiver had a similar experience when he attended meetings concerning his son's engagement at school. For example, he spoke of the communication he had with the school as being invasive:

"When I went back to the meeting and asked [name omitted] to stay at school then the next day when I brought him to school they put [name omitted] in a meeting and asked [name omitted] if I'd beat him up, that was the final straw, when I gave up".

One caregiver prior to her son being labelled as truant spoke of how she had to argue with the school that her son was actually at school when the school had recorded him as absent. She recalls how *"they never changed their records they just recorded him as being truant"*. These voices tell a story of frustration in trying to follow the process that schools adhere to when a young person has become either truant or is considered a problem.

When the question over prosecution was asked by kaiāwhina, the majority of caregivers all said that being prosecuted was a big worry for them. For some it was having to spend money on a fine they did not have, and for others it was the shame of *"feeling as though you're not doing your job properly"*. One caregiver who had prosecution concerns decided not to enroll her son at school because *"I knew it was a waste of time me enrolling him in a school because he probably wouldn't go...didn't want to waste my money on a uniform"*.

One of the sub-themes to emerge from the voices gathered was the notion of whose responsibility it is to ensure a young person is engaged in education: Is it the schools or is it the caregivers? Both groups argued that it was their job to get their child to school, and all the caregivers indicated that they worked hard to do so. They argued that what happened at school was the schools' job. It was the schools' job to keep them there. For example, one caregiver argued it was really unfair that she could be prosecuted for what she saw as a school's responsibility:

"I think it's really unfair, cos we do everything in our power to get our daughter to school and yet as parents we're the ones that get prosecuted...we can't physically make them go to school, other than getting her up and dropping her off at school...I think the system is shit".

3.2.4. What caregivers would like to change about schools

All of the caregivers had very strong views on what schools could be doing better to engage their young people at school. Many of the caregivers from both groups expressed a desire to be more informed of what was happening at school. For example, one Māori caregiver spoke of “*getting on to things before they get too far*”; while another Māori caregiver mentioned that she wanted to be kept informed: “*I guess just keep me informed like when he was getting into trouble so it just didn't build up [then it's too late]*”. Another caregiver suggested that schools and teachers “*don't give up on them*”.

As discussed previously, many caregivers (and young people) spoke of their frustration over bullying and the lack of interventive attention this issue received at schools. One parent spoke of her daughter being so badly bullied at her school that she pulled her out.

Another common concern raised was that of culturally responsive approaches, including the ability of teachers to relate and support young people from a range of different ethnic backgrounds. One caregiver noted that there was a “*lack of cultural avenues for support for young Māori*”. Another caregiver spoke of an overabundance of Pasifika focus at the school her son attended, while overlooking the needs of other cultural groups. This caregiver stated:

“they have a big Pacific Island thing at [name of school omitted]...it segregates them from other people...everything should be available to everybody, you don't focus on one and not the others...an if you're Māori it doesn't mean that you are a misbehaving little...”

There were a diverse range of other concerns that caregivers raised. There was also a familiar theme that “*classes and the school was too big*”. Another caregiver suggested there was a lack of opportunities for work experience for Year 9 & 10 students to help with the transition from secondary school to the workforce, particularly if they are not academic. This caregiver also suggested that schools:

“Needed more sports coaches, cut down class sizes, more teachers and counsellors to be on hand when there's someone in trouble [instead] of the child sitting outside the classroom stewing”.

There was also a strong emphasis from caregivers on how young people get bored at school because they are not learning what caregivers perceive to be useful information. As one caregiver suggested they need to be: *"learning how to get a mortgage, learning budgeting skills and all the life skills not bloody history, he tells us all the time that school is not for him"*.

As discussed previously five of the Māori families who participated had recently shifted to Christchurch to access better opportunities for their young people. They all spoke of the South Island as having a more positive influence on young peoples' attitudes. For example, one caregiver spoke of how her sons' *"attitude changed...when we came down here he relaxed, up North he wasn't because up North [there] is a different type of student, like hard and he was big"*. Similarly, another caregiver observed:

"it's a whole nutha ball game when you are up in the North Island compared to Christchurch, everyone's like more polite, friendly...up there I mean you're with the naughty naughty kids so yeah..."

This caregiver had experienced her young person being in Alternative Education in the North Island and she felt that with young people:

"you've just gotta take a more softer kinder approach regardless of what type of upbringing you still gotta take a more softer approach with the students, cos they can't really relate...I think a lot of students just fall through the cracks and teachers just give up...I noticed in Gisborne they're selective on who they want to help...got good grades go far...the ones that come from a gang upbringing, a lot of them are defiant, drugs..."

Some caregivers suggested a later start for teenagers could be a good idea, *"he's a teenage boy so he sleeps a lot so starting later"*. They found it difficult to get their young people out of bed in the morning, and this meant that their days often began with a battle. All of the caregivers interviewed said they were organized in the morning as they had to be in order to get family members off to work and school. However getting young people off to school was a struggle:

"getting him up was really hard, I had battles with him every morning to get him up to go to school, by the time he got to school he was even angrier...so he took it out on everybody and anybody".

"I take the kids and their father to work I have to wake up [name omitted] an hour before, and continue to wake him up until the time we actually leave".

3.2.5. Summary of caregivers' perspectives

All caregivers interviewed valued secondary schooling, as they perceived it to be important for success in adulthood. Consequently, many caregivers spoke of the ways in which they engaged young people in conversations around attendance, and also ways in which they tried to get their young people to attend school. Many expressed concern about a lack of meaningful and effective communication with school personnel, and they held very real concerns about the threat of prosecution. In some cases, they felt that the schools had failed to create a safe place for their young people (in cases of bullying), yet it was them as parents who could be prosecuted for not being able to keep the young people at school. A number of caregivers expressed concerns around bullying and the ways in which this prevented young people from attending school.

Many caregivers wanted schools to communicate more regularly with them over any concerns that the school may have, and they wished to be more informed about what was happening at school. Interestingly, Māori caregivers reported more positive communication and support from key personnel, compared to non-Māori. It was unclear from this study why this was the case, and more research is recommended to explore this idea further.

Interestingly, five of the ten Māori caregivers had recently moved from the North Island to Christchurch. Even though their young people had struggled at school, they all commented on the way in which the young peoples' attitudes had improved by attending Christchurch schools.

Both Māori and non-Māori caregivers commented on a desire for schools to become more culturally relevant to different groups. They also commented on the need for a more relevant curriculum that prepared students more pragmatically.

4. Discussion

Young people and caregivers expressed a number of similar ideas about schooling and experiences of truancy and being NE. These included: a desire to connect and engage with learning; the need for effective communication and positive relationships at school with teachers and other students; and the related theme of bullying.

Regarding the idea of engaging and connecting with learning, all caregivers spoke of their desire to see young people succeeding at school. They recognised this as a critical step in achieving success later in life. Young people also expressed a desire to want to succeed at school. They saw the need to access help from teachers, and to have positive relationships with school personnel and other students as pivotal to engaging at school.

For caregivers, positive relationships and effective communication was also highly valued. Consequently, both young people and caregivers expressed concern when a break down in key relationships did occur. They gave both classroom examples, such as teachers not knowing student names; as well as school management level examples, such as not being kept up to date with young peoples' attendance issues. The findings of this study are consistent with a recent study on young peoples' experiences of truancy.¹⁰ In that report the most prevalent theme that emerged was a need for young people to have positive relationships with their teachers in order to learn.

What has been highlighted through the voices of caregivers/families of both ethnic groups in this report is that caregivers have often felt marginalized. Caregivers reported experiences where effective methods of communication have been lacking. In one case a young person was been taken off the school roll without the caregivers believing they were fully informed. The consequences are concerning for all parties involved. This was particularly expressed by caregivers who were concerned about the possible threat of prosecution when they reported trying their hardest to keep the young people engaged at school. A recent New Zealand report for Controller and Auditor-General¹¹ has

¹⁰ Bruce, J. (2018). *Dis/Engagement in secondary schools: Towards truancy prevention*. Report for Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi. Available at: <http://teorahou.org.nz/>.

¹¹ Berryman, M., Kerr, L., Macfarlane, A.H., Penetito, W., Smith, G.H. (2016). *Summary of Our Education for Māori Reports*. Retrieved from: <http://oag.govt.nz/2016/education-for-maori-summary/docs/summary-education-for-maori.pdf>.

highlighted the need for schools to “engage with whānau better” and this means “clearly and consistently communicating with students and whānau”. According to the report, greater attention needs to be given in this area, especially for higher decile schools and schools with a lower proportion of Māori students. The authors also recommended that stronger relationships be established with local iwi and hapu.

Perhaps one of the most challenging situations for caregivers trying to get their young people to attend school was when there were cases of bullying. Both young people and caregivers discussed at length concerns related to bullying. The findings from this study suggest that this could be a factor impacting upon truancy in the Christchurch region. Both young people and caregivers expressed frustration regarding a perceived lack of action by school leadership around bullying. At times this led to a refusal by young people to attend school. Research indicates that young people affected by bullying were less likely to become truant if they were provided with the following support:

“A place of refuge where they can feel safe, appreciated, and challenged in a constructive way.

Responsible adults who can support and sustain them and provide them examples of appropriate behaviour.

A sense of future possibility to persuade them that staying in school, despite the bullying, promises better things to come”¹²

In a series of studies investigating young people’s experiences of being bullied, the researchers¹³ concluded that schools may “overcome this negative effect if they adopt strategies that engage students in their work, creating positive learning environments that produce academic achievement” (p. 9).

There was one area of difference between Māori and non-Māori young people and caregiver groups, and this related to the area of perceived support. Whereas non-Māori young people reported receiving greater levels of support from school personnel, it was Māori caregivers who reported similarly. The majority of Māori caregivers indicated

¹² Seeley, K., Tombari, M.L., Bennett, L.J., & Dunkle, J.B. (2011). Bullying in schools: An overview. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, pp. 1-10.

¹³ Ibid.

that they felt supported by school leadership and pastoral care staff. By contrast non-Māori caregivers and Māori young people reported difficulties accessing the support they needed to stay engaged in the schooling process. The reasons for these differences are unclear and further research is needed to probe deeper into the NE experiences of Māori and non-Māori young people and caregivers.

5. Conclusion: Research, Policy and Practice Implications

The findings of this research project do not indicate why Māori young people are more likely than non-Māori to be NE. There was only one area of difference between non-Māori and Māori young people, and that was the perceived level of support they reported being able to access. This finding is consistent with other studies¹⁴ which also indicate that Māori young people are more likely to engage in school when there is a clear sense of whanaungatanga - both with other young people and with teachers. Given that there were no other clear areas of differences between Māori and non-Māori experiences, it is unclear from this study why Māori young people are more likely to become NE.

There were however some interesting findings to emerge that related to both groups of young people, and also the caregivers. Further consideration for research, policy and practice of key stakeholders (including kaiāwhina, other Attendance Service providers, MOE, and schools) could be given to a number of issues raised in this report. Regarding research implications it is recommended that research be undertaken to explore further, the perspectives of caregivers affected by truancy and non-enrolment of young people in their care. The caregivers interviewed for this study raised some significant issues regarding access of support for themselves and young people in their care; however, because just 20 caregivers were interviewed, further research is recommended. One issue that was repeatedly raised by caregivers was the level of support provided by schools. There were mixed responses, but it was clear that caregiver involvement was critical for all concerned and that greater consideration be given to this area by schools and MOE. The final area requiring further investigation is bullying intervention and prevention strategies, particularly links to truancy and non-enrolment. This research suggests that where bullying wasn't addressed in schools, young people became disengaged. The findings of this study suggest that in some cases young people would rather experience tensions with their caregivers at home, than attend school and experience bullying there.

¹⁴ Bishop, R., & Glynn, T. (1999). *Culture counts. Changing power relations in education*. Palmerston North, NZ: Dunmore Press.