

He Whakaaro

EDUCATION INSIGHTS

What do we know about bullying behaviours in New Zealand?¹

Summary

This paper summarises what we know about bullying in the education system. Bullying has widespread implications not only for the students exposed to it (those who are bullied, those doing the bullying and the observers), but to their family wellbeing and the culture of schools and communities. We provide a setting for further discussion and research into bullying by examining the trends and forms of bullying that are currently known in New Zealand.

KEY FINDINGS

- New Zealand has one of the highest rates of bullying in the world.
- About 36% of Year 5 and 38% of Year 9 students surveyed in PIRLS and TIMSS reported that they were bullied on a monthly basis.
- About 33% of 15-year-old students in New Zealand report that they have never been bullied.
- 'Being made fun of' and 'being excluded on purpose from activities' are consistently the most common forms of bullying.
- The proportion of students who report some bullying behaviours tends to reduce with age.
- Students that are more likely to be exposed to bullying are: male; disabled; LGBTQIA+, particularly transgender students; New Zealand born; low achievers; and from a disadvantaged background.

¹ Authored by Mercy Mhuru, October 2020

- Bullying is related to racism and discrimination, but these concepts are not the same – some of the groups reporting the highest rates of bullying also report the lowest rates of discrimination, and vice-versa.
- About 27% of students self-reported engaging in bullying behaviours, and up to a third of students taking part in bullying might themselves be bullied.

What is this paper about?

This paper is an outline of what is known about bullying in New Zealand. We combine findings from several reports on discrimination and wellbeing as well as international assessments to describe the forms and characteristics of bullying that students are exposed to in the education system. By describing what is known about bullying and the different forms that it takes, the report highlights possible areas for future research and brings out the grey areas in this topic that could provide useful insights if explored.

Measuring and trends in bullying

Bullying is defined as harmful behaviour that is deliberate, involves a misuse of power in a relationship and has an element of repetition (Bullyingfree NZ definition). This definition is consistent with definitions in international assessments like PISA. While some bullying behaviour is physical and easy to recognise, like hitting a classmate, other forms of bullying are much more complex as they are quiet and covert, yet they can cause emotional harm to the people exposed to them.

Table 1. An overview of regular surveys containing bullying data

Collection	Population	Frequency	Scope
Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)	Year 5 students	Every five years	International (about 50 countries)
Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)	Year 5 and 9 students	Every four years	International (about 40 countries)
Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA)	Students aged 15	Every three years	International (about 70 countries)
Youth2000 national health and wellbeing survey	Secondary school students	In 2001, 2007, 2012 and 2018	National
Youth Connectedness Project (longitudinal survey)	Students aged 10-15	2006-2008	National
Wellbeing@School	Students in Years 5-13	At schools' discretion	National

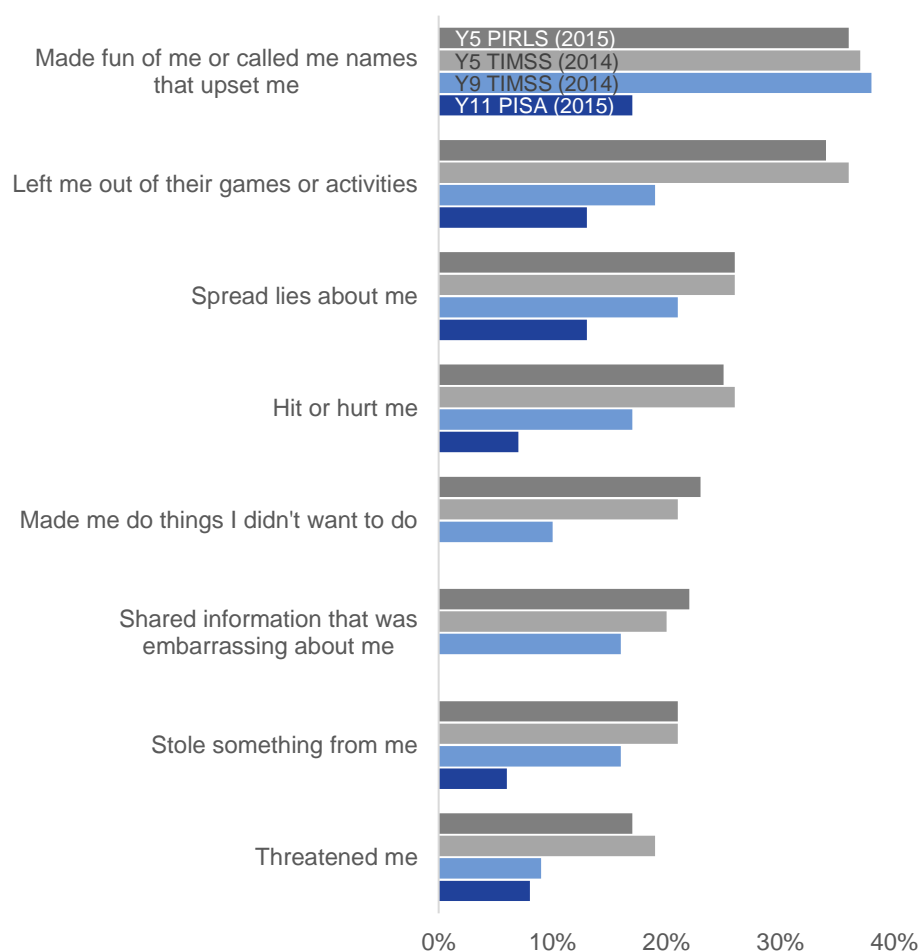
Being made fun of is the most prevalent form of bullying, followed by being left out of things on purpose

Most of our data about bullying comes from regular surveys of students, typically in upper primary or in secondary schools. Table 1 shows an overview of these surveys. Note that unlike the other surveys, Wellbeing@School is an opt-in self-review resource so the data from this survey is not necessarily nationally representative.

Figure 1 shows the questions asked in PIRLS, PISA and TIMSS and the proportion of students who experienced these behaviours in surveys over 2014 and 2015.² There are some slight differences between the surveys, but the results in Figure 1 show that being made fun of is the most prevalent form of bullying, followed by being left out of things on purpose. These more prevalent forms of bullying are covert in nature yet can have far-reaching and harmful effects.

The proportion of students exposed to bullying behaviours tends to reduce as students grow older. For example, the rate of students in TIMSS reporting others had left them out of games or activities, made them do things they didn't want to do, or threatened them was about half as high for students in Year 9 (13-14 year olds) as in Year 5 (9-10 year olds).

Figure 1. Percentage of students reporting being bullied monthly, 2014/2015



Note: PISA 2015 asked students whether behaviours occurred 'a few times a month', whereas PIRLS and TIMSS asked whether behaviours occurred 'about weekly/monthly'. For comparison purposes, assessments done around the same time period in 2014/15 were used.

Sources: Chamberlain (2019) Fig 3.7; CERU (2017) Fig 2.4.

Internationally comparable surveys show that, when compared to other countries, New Zealand has a far higher proportion of students reporting

² To compare outcomes across different assessments and ages, Figure 1 uses results from assessments that were within the same time period.

Compared to other countries, New Zealand has a far higher proportion of students reporting being frequently bullied

being frequently bullied. In the most recent PISA survey of 15-year olds in 2018, for example, students in New Zealand are 7.5 times more likely to be frequently bullied compared to their peers in the Netherlands.³

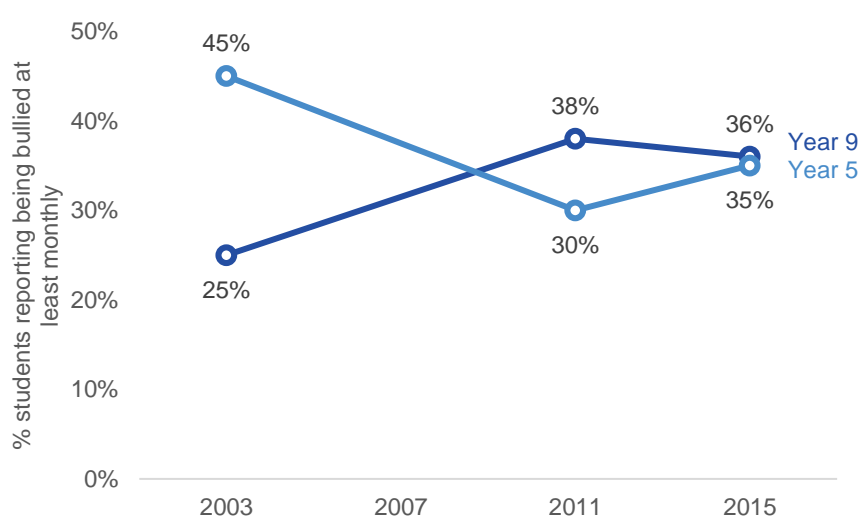
About 33% of 15-year-old students in New Zealand report never or almost never being bullied, while an additional 35% experienced less frequent bullying. These proportions show that about 68% of 15-year-old students experience little to no bullying, leaving about 32% of students exposed to frequent bullying. While these results show that Year 5 students know and experience what bullying is, it may often start much earlier. The Children's Commissioner's (2017) child and youth voices on bullying in Aotearoa report shows that children aged as young as six have been exposed to bullying and have expressed how it makes them feel sad and powerless.

The Youth Connectedness Project was a longitudinal survey in New Zealand that tracked students for three years, asking them questions about bullying. A study of this data found that the proportion of students reporting experiencing bullying fell with age after age 12-14 (Kljakovic, Hunt and Jose, 2015).⁴

Data on trends in bullying over time generally shows no consistent pattern. For TIMSS, bullying rates have fluctuated over the past decade, often going in different directions in Years 5 and 9 (Figure 2).⁵ For PIRLS, bullying rates have consistently been between 35% and 38% from 2001 to the 2015 surveys. For PISA 2018, a long time series is not available due to changes in the questions, but 32% of 15-year-old students reported being exposed to any type of bullying in the last year, a 6% increase from the 2015 survey.

However, when asked about specific bullying behaviour (as in Figure 1), the pattern emerging is that a lower proportion of older students report on bullying activities such as being left out of games or being pushed compared to younger students. This suggests that as students get older, they also build resilience to some bullying activities.

Figure 2. Proportion of students reporting being exposed to bullying, TIMSS



Note: Bullying data not available for 2007.

³ New Zealand ranks sixth among 74 countries where students report frequent bullying. The Netherlands has the lowest rate of frequent bullying at 2%.

⁴ The Youth Connectedness Project is a self-reporting study was conducted by Victoria University of Wellington over 3 years from 2007-2009 on children aged 10, 12 and 14.

⁵ The up and down trend over time suggests that different cohorts of Year 5 and Year 9 students have different perceptions about bullying. A more informative trend can be formed by asking the same questions on bullying to the same cohort over time.

Who is likely to be exposed to bullying?

In Figure 3, we combine all demographic characteristics of students who are likely to be exposed to bullying, based on research from the PISA and Youth2000 surveys.⁶ Students who are low achievers in reading literacy are 1.7 times more likely to be bullied compared to high-achieving students. In addition, students in Years 7-10 are 1.5 times more likely to be bullied compared to students in Years 11-13. This is consistent with Kljakovic, Hunt and Jose (2015) who suggest that bullying prevalence starts to decline after age 12.

Students who are socio-economically disadvantaged are 1.2 times more likely to be exposed to bullying relative to those in socio-economically advantaged backgrounds. These ratios, while showing us which students are more likely to be bullied when describing their education and school characteristics, also suggest that there is a relationship between bullying and education outcomes.

Students who are low-achieving, disabled, transgender, male, or in Years 7-10 are more likely to experience bullying.

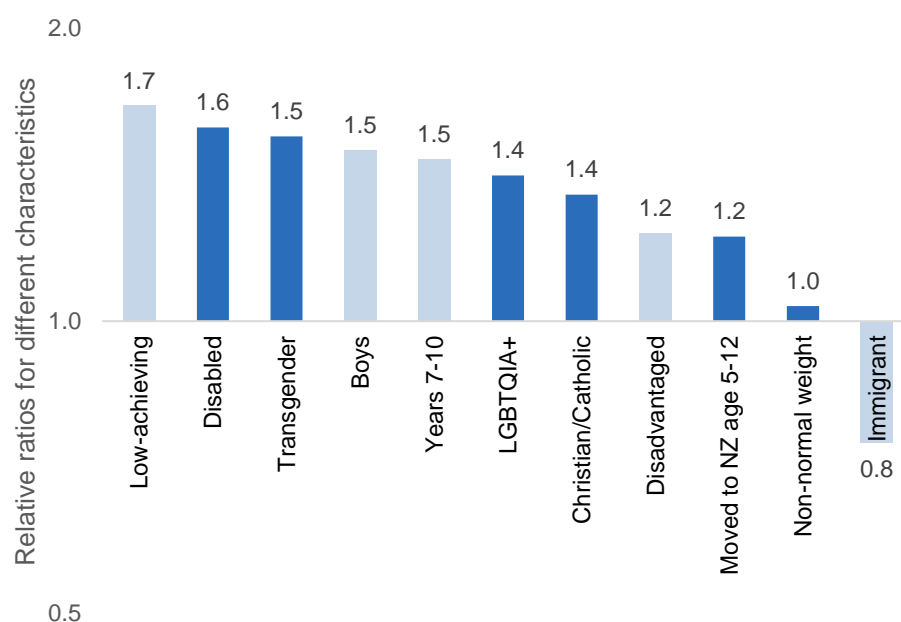
Other characteristics that expose students to higher chances of being bullied include being disabled or having health problems (1.6 times more likely than non-disabled students); identifying as LGBTQIA+ (1.4 times more likely to be bullied than cis-gender/heterosexual students), including transgender students (1.5 times more likely than cis-gender/heterosexual students).⁷ The PISA 2018 report finds that immigrant students are 0.75 times less likely to be bullied compared to their New Zealand born peers.

There is no data to directly show bullying rates for Asian students especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reports indicate that discrimination against Asian adults increased during the pandemic, albeit at a lower rate in New Zealand compared to other countries.⁸

⁶ We use reported proportions in PISA 2018 (Figure 3.11) and McGregor and Webber (2019) (Table A2) to describe the characteristics of students who are likely to be bullied. These are derived from different samples - PISA focuses on responses from 15-year old students while Youth2000 responses are from all secondary school students in 2012. The Youth2000 survey of 2012 is the most recent survey for which data is available.

⁷ McGregor and Webber (2019) show further details on the proportions of students likely to be bullied across different groups including gender, sexuality, ethnicity and religion. The report is available at <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/schooling/he-whakaaro-what-do-we-know-about-discrimination-in-schools>. The PISA 2018 report is also available at: <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/PISA/pisa-2018/pisa-2018-student-wellbeing>

⁸ Some reports covering discrimination and racism during the COVID-19 pandemic include: https://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/about-massey/news/article.cfm?mnarticle_uid=C96BA856-47D3-4D67-9DF3-9B06E10CB18C and <https://www.ecald.com/assets/Uploads/1A-2020-07-E56-AFS-Asian-Family-Services-New-Zealand-Asian-Mental-Health-Wellbeing-Report-2020-Trace-Research-Lite-Version2.pdf> and <https://www.tvnz.co.nz/one-news/new-zealand/human-rights-commission-launches-new-campaign-after-asian-discrimination-reports-during-covid-19-pandemic>.

Figure 3. The characteristics of students who are likely to be bullied

Sources: Jang-Jones & McGregor (2019) Fig 3.11 (light blue bars); McGregor & Webber (2019) Table A2 (dark blue bars).

Students' perception and mind-sets are related to bullying. PISA 2018 finds that students' mind-sets and resilience levels influence their sense of belonging at school.⁹ Students with a weaker sense of belonging were found to also report that they were bullied and achieve poorly compared to those with a stronger sense of belonging (Jang-Jones & McGregor, 2019). McGregor and Webber (2020) find that exposure to bullying negatively correlates with sense of belonging at 0.3 and bullying correlates with school attendance at 0.098.¹⁰ These correlations are relatively small, indicating that there may be many 'outlier' students, who may be bullied but not have it affect other aspects of their wellbeing.

Bullying and discrimination are related, but distinct

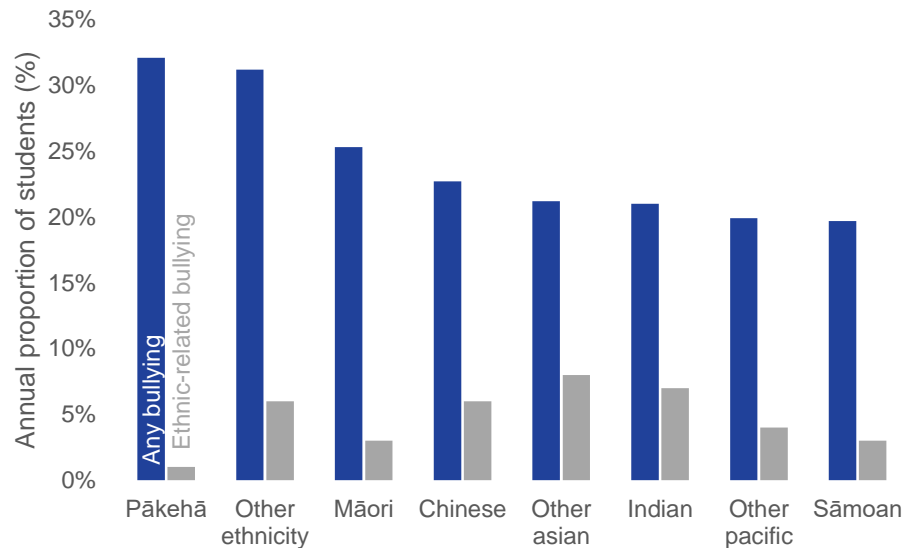
Bullying and discrimination are related, as the factors influencing some forms of these behaviours are identical. McGregor and Webber (2019) find that ethnicity, migrant status, religion and sexual orientation are factors that expose different groups of students to these two behaviours. Discrimination often occurs through adults, where one student or group is treated less favourably based on prejudiced opinions, while bullying is generally peer-to-peer behaviour that may or may not be motivated by preconceived notions. Using this definition, some forms of bullying, such as purposefully excluding some students from things, can be a form of discrimination, occurring among peers where a student or a group is excluded from activities based on preconceived notions. However, there are other forms of general bullying that are quite different from discrimination. For these, it is complex to identify why they occur, and they represent a different phenomenon with different underlying causes.

⁹ The PISA 2018 questionnaire includes questions designed to measure aspects of students' mind-sets. The relationship between sense of belonging and general self-efficacy (resilience) was very strong with a correlation greater than 0.5.

¹⁰ Correlation is a measure of association between two variables ranging from -1 to +1. A correlation of -1 means that when one is increasing, the other is decreasing. A correlation of +1 means the two variables always increase/decrease together. A correlation of 0 shows that the two variables are unrelated to each other.

As an example of these complex relationships, McGregor and Webber (2019) find that Pākehā students report among the highest rates of bullying of any ethnic group (though the lowest rate of being bullied due to their ethnicity; see Figure 4). This is somewhat consistent with findings from PISA, where Pākehā and Māori students report the highest rates of bullying. Chinese, Indian and other Asian ethnicities were 5-8 times as likely to be exposed to ethnic-related bullying as Pākehā students, although the prevalence of ethnic-related bullying is lower compared to general bullying. This shows that ethnicity-related is not the major vector through which many students are bullied.

Figure 4. Students reporting bullying in 2012 in the last year, by ethnicity



Source: McGregor and Webber (2019). Data taken from the Youth2000 survey, 2012 wave.

What do we know about students who take part in bullying?

Most of our data collections on bullying collect only information about students experiencing bullying behaviours. The Youth Connectedness Project survey is unique in that it asked students both whether they have experienced bullying behaviours, and also whether they have participated in them (Kljakovic, Hunt and Jose, 2015). Figure 5 shows the proportion of students who were exposed to bullying and those who took part in bullying. About 27% of students reported that they have taken part in bullying others, while 35% of students have been exposed to bullying. This implies the average student who engages in bullying has targeted 1.3 other students. About one-in-five students reported bullying other students about 1-3 times in the month prior to the 2007-2009 wave of the survey, while 4% reported bullying others frequently (7 times or more and almost daily) in the same period.

About 27% of students reported that they have participated in bullying others.

Figure 5. The proportion of students who took part in bullying and students who were exposed to bullying, and frequencies

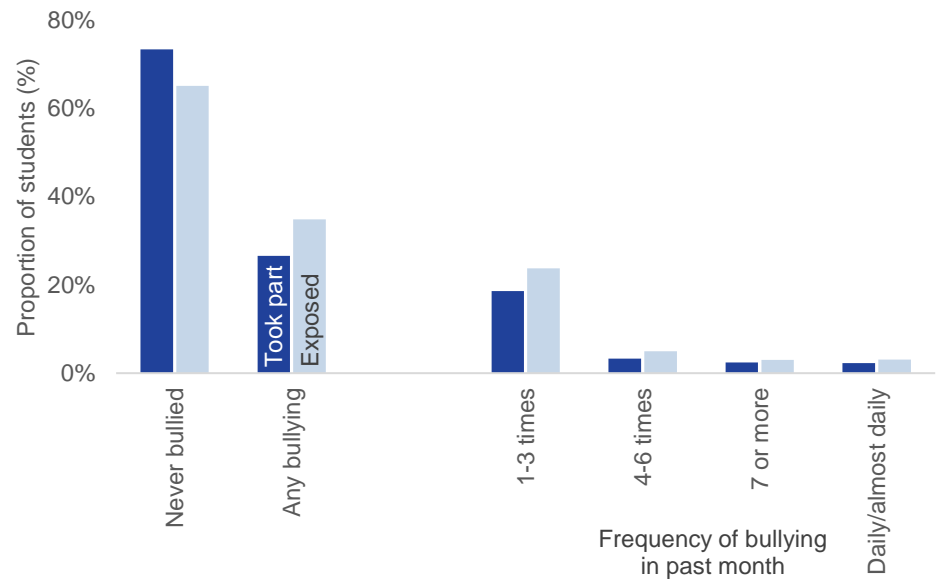
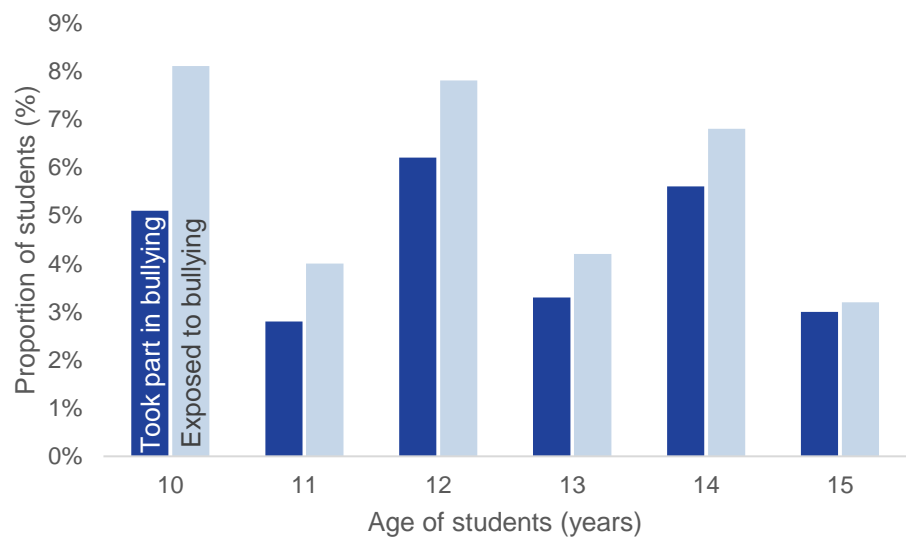


Figure 6 shows the proportion of students who participated in bullying and students who experienced bullying by age in the first wave of the survey in 2007. Between the ages of 10-14 years, bullying activity increases, with the proportion of students who report bullying others peaking at 6% for 12-year olds. The proportion of students reporting that they experienced bullying peaks at 8% for 10-year olds. By 15-years, the rates of bullying activity reduce to 3%.

Figure 6. The proportion of students who took part in and were exposed to bullying, by age



This may leave out students who do both: take part in and experience bullying.

Kljakovic, Hunt and Jose (2015) go on to look at the distribution of both students who experienced bullying and students who participated in bullying by gender and ethnicity. They find that males are slightly more likely than females to report engaging in bullying, but no more likely to report experiencing bullying. They also found that Māori students were slightly more likely than Pākehā students to report both engaging in and experiencing bullying behaviours. These findings are somewhat at odds with the results above from other surveys, which may indicate differences in sample or the ways in which these questions were asked.

The distinction between students engaging in bullying behaviour and experiencing this from others also leaves out a group of students who may do both: take part in and experience bullying. Graham (2016) argues that these students may respond to receiving negative attention by externalising and harming others: 'they are overwhelmingly rejected by their peers, while not enjoying any of the social benefits that sometimes accrue to bullies' (p.139). There does not appear to be any research estimating the prevalence of these students in New Zealand, but an international survey of 40 (mainly OECD) countries found that about a third of students engaging in bullying behaviours in most countries were themselves experiencing bullying from others (Craig et al., 2009).

Are there any unanswered questions?

It is clear that bullying is a major problem in the New Zealand education system. There are several relationships that have been hypothesized by the descriptions of bullying in this paper. Students who experience bullying are found to have a lower sense of belonging and ultimately have lower educational outcomes. Truancy and behavioural issues are often closely related to bullying, but what direction this causality goes is difficult to determine. Exploring these linkages and measuring the effect sizes of bullying on other wellbeing and educational factors of interest is a starting point in creating monetized outcomes. Cyberbullying and bullying through text messages or social media are growing forms of bullying, meaning bullying may not stop even when the impacted student is in an environment where they should feel safe, loved and accepted. This also means that traditional distinctions between bullying at school and out of school are being blurred, which has implications for how we measure bullying, as well as how schools can effectively respond to and prevent it. There is a need for further research into effective solutions, including the barriers and enablers for these.

Conclusion

New Zealand students consistently report some of the highest rates of bullying in the world, with up to a third of students experiencing many harmful behaviours on at least a monthly basis. This does not appear to have substantially changed over the last several decades, indicating that previous approaches may not have been successful.

Approaches to bullying should have regard to which students we know are most likely to be targeted, and how they experience bullying (which may be different for different groups). Evidence indicates that students are most likely to experience bullying in the middle years, and rates are highest for low achieving students, disabled students, male students, and those identifying as LGBTQIA+. Bullying is linked with and can be motivated by discrimination, but the two are not interchangeable: Pākehā students are the ethnic group reporting the highest rates of bullying, and these students report the lowest rates of experienced discrimination.

We collect far less information on students engaging in bullying behaviours, and previous research has not focused as much on this group. Data from New Zealand surveys that ask about engaging in and experiencing bullying indicate that the size of both groups is substantial: it does not appear to be a small minority of students bullying a large number of their peers. International evidence also suggests that a substantial fraction of these students are themselves experiencing bullying from other peers. Particularly for these types of situations,

Bullying may be the most important issue facing children and young people in New Zealand.

adversarial or punitive approaches to responding to bullying may be less likely to be effective.

Due to the widespread nature of bullying in New Zealand schools, and the negative impact it can have on all aspects of wellbeing, it may not be an exaggeration to say that bullying is the most important issue facing children and young people in New Zealand. The problem is only becoming more complex due to the digital world and requires ongoing efforts to address it.

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For further information, questions or discussion around additional analysis and potential topics for future research, please contact Requests.EDK@education.govt.nz.

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