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Growing Up
in New Zealand

Now We Are 15 Policy Brief

Cultural connection as a protective factor

What Growing Up in New Zealand data tells us about nurturing cultural connectedness for young people

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The issue

Cultural connectedness is a sense of belonging to, pride in, and engagement with one's own ethnic and cultural groups. Young people who report stronger cultural connectedness consistently report better mental wellbeing, greater school satisfaction, higher academic buoyancy, and more positive peer relationships. The benefits of greater cultural connectedness are reported across all ethnicities.

Even after accounting for other factors, strong cultural connectedness remains independently linked to better mental wellbeing and more positive peer relationships.

Policy settings that take a considered approach to enhancing cultural connectedness in schools, and communities, would likely support strategies that aim to improve wellbeing and educational outcomes. Cultural responsiveness, in this context, means environments where young people's heritage, language, and cultural identity are genuinely reflected in curriculum, teaching practice, institutional values and access to cultural supports.

Key data at a glance

Levels of cultural connection

- Pacific young people report the **highest** cultural connectedness; European young people report the **lowest**

What cultural connectedness is associated with

- Higher school satisfaction is associated with **significantly higher** cultural connectedness
- Cultural connectedness is **correlated with** academic buoyancy, a young person's everyday ability to bounce back from the normal ups and downs of school life

What remains significant after adjustment

- Strong cultural connectedness is independently associated with **higher mental wellbeing**
- Strong cultural connectedness is independently associated with **more positive peer relationships**

The policy context

Cultural connectedness connects to several current areas of government policy focus.

The Ministry of Education's purpose

To shape an education system that delivers equitable and excellent outcomes

2023 cross-agency Long-Term Insights Briefing on youth employment

Identifies rangatahi Māori, Pacific young people, disabled and deaf young people, and young mothers as requiring tailored effort to achieve equitable outcomes

The Government Policy Statement on Health 2024

Highlights Māori and Pacific peoples as priority populations, consistent with the Pae Ora (Healthy Futures) Act 2022

The Suicide Prevention Action Plan 2025–2029

Explicitly identifies culturally appropriate support as a key component of postvention

Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations

Require the Crown to actively protect Māori culture, language, and identity – obligations with direct implications for education and health policy

What the GUiNZ data shows

Cultural connectedness was measured in the GUiNZ cohort using the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), a validated 12-item scale covering belonging, pride, participation in cultural practices, and sense of ethnic identity (scale range 1–5, higher scores indicate stronger cultural connectedness). This measure was completed by 4,183 young people at the 15-year data collection wave.

Cultural connectedness scores across the cohort

- Pacific young people reported the **highest** average cultural connectedness (3.70 out of 5), followed by MELAA young people (3.57), rangatahi Māori (3.54), and Asian young people (3.52).
 - European young people reported the **lowest** average cultural connectedness (2.98), a gap of approximately 0.7 points relative to Pacific young people.
 - The groups with the strongest cultural connectedness are also among those facing the greatest structural disadvantage. This suggests cultural connectedness operates as an **independent source** of wellbeing, not a solution to the structural inequities these young people continue to navigate.
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Cultural connectedness and educational outcomes

- Young people who reported higher school satisfaction showed statistically **significantly higher** cultural connectedness (mean 3.4) than those with lower school satisfaction (mean 3.2; $p < .001$).
 - Cultural connectedness was **positively and significantly correlated** with academic buoyancy ($r = 0.14$; $p < .001$) – the capacity of the young person to manage academic setbacks and pressure.
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Cultural connectedness and mental wellbeing

- In the full multivariable model – adjusting for ethnicity, gender, disability, deprivation, rurality, material hardship trajectories, discrimination, school satisfaction, academic buoyancy, and peer relationships – cultural connectedness remained independently and significantly associated with **higher mental wellbeing**.
- Cultural connectedness was also independently and significantly associated with **more positive peer relationships**.
- Cultural connectedness **did not show** a significant independent association with anxiety or depression symptoms in the full multivariable model. The strongest evidence is for mental wellbeing and peer relationships.
- Even after adjusting for cultural connectedness, rangatahi Māori and Pacific young people reported **significantly lower** mental wellbeing than European young people.
- Cultural connectedness is a protective factor, but it **does not alone** combat ethnic inequities in mental wellbeing predominantly attributed to structural determinants.

The effects of discrimination

- Experiencing any form of discrimination was associated with **lower cultural connectedness, lower school satisfaction, lower academic buoyancy, and poorer mental health outcomes** in the cohort.
- Cultural connectedness and discrimination represent two sides of the same dynamic: environments that affirm cultural identity **build** resilience and engagement; environments that permit discrimination **erode** it. Both findings point toward the same set of policy levers.

School environment and cultural responsiveness

- Caregivers of young people attending Wharekura reported the **highest** average satisfaction with how the school responded to their child's needs (4.38 on a 5-point scale), compared with English medium schools (4.11), a statistically significant difference.¹

What this means for policy

1

Recognise cultural connectedness as an outcome and lever, not just a value

Cultural connectedness is often treated in policy as a value to respect rather than a protective factor with measurable effects. The GUINZ data supports a shift: Cultural connectedness is independently linked to better mental wellbeing and stronger peer relationships, and associated with school satisfaction and academic buoyancy. Investing in culturally responsive environments is investing in outcomes government strategies have already committed to.

2

Support culturally responsive school environments at scale

The Education Snapshot calls for policy settings that recognise culture as a driver of engagement in education. This means resourcing schools to develop culturally responsive curricula and teaching practice, investing in cultural identity programmes, and building workforce capability to support diverse cultural needs including te reo Māori and Pacific language education as part of educational achievement, not separate from it.

¹ This finding is noted as supporting evidence: the Wharekura sample is small (n=53 rangatahi Māori), the measure is caregiver satisfaction rather than student outcomes directly, and the wide confidence interval (0.01 to 0.54) indicates the estimate is imprecise.

3

Incorporate cultural connectedness into youth mental health frameworks

Cultural connectedness is associated with better mental wellbeing and more positive peer relationships, both important dimensions of young people's broader wellbeing. Youth mental health frameworks should include cultural identity programmes and community-based cultural support alongside clinical services.

4

Address discrimination as the barrier to cultural connectedness

Cultural connectedness and discrimination are two sides of the same evidence. Young people can't draw protective benefits from cultural identity in environments that demean or dismiss it. Policies that build cultural connectedness must work alongside – not instead of – policies that eliminate discrimination.

A note on causal inference and residual inequity

These patterns remain even after ruling out other explanations, but they don't tell us what's causing what. Cultural connectedness may support better outcomes, better mental health may make cultural connectedness easier to feel, or both may be happening together. And even accounting for cultural connectedness, Māori and Pacific young people still report lower mental wellbeing than European young people. So this brief treats cultural connectedness as a factor worth investing in, not as the answer to ethnic inequities in youth mental health.



About Growing Up in New Zealand

Growing Up in New Zealand is Aotearoa New Zealand's largest contemporary longitudinal study of child and youth development. The study enrolled more than 6,000 young people before birth and has now followed them and their whānau for nearly 18 years.

The cohort reflects the diversity of Aotearoa New Zealand, providing rich insight into the different experiences, strengths and challenges shaping young people's lives across childhood and adolescence.

A core commitment of Growing Up in New Zealand is to ensure the voices and experiences shared by young people and their families are heard by those making decisions that affect them. By following the same young people over time, the study can connect their current health, wellbeing, education and social outcomes with experiences and circumstances across childhood in ways that point-in-time surveys or administrative data alone cannot.

This long-term investment has created a unique national evidence resource that can inform policy, services and decisions for children, young people and whānau now and into the future.

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Source

[Growing Up in New Zealand Now We Are 15 Snapshot reports and supplementary materials](#)



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