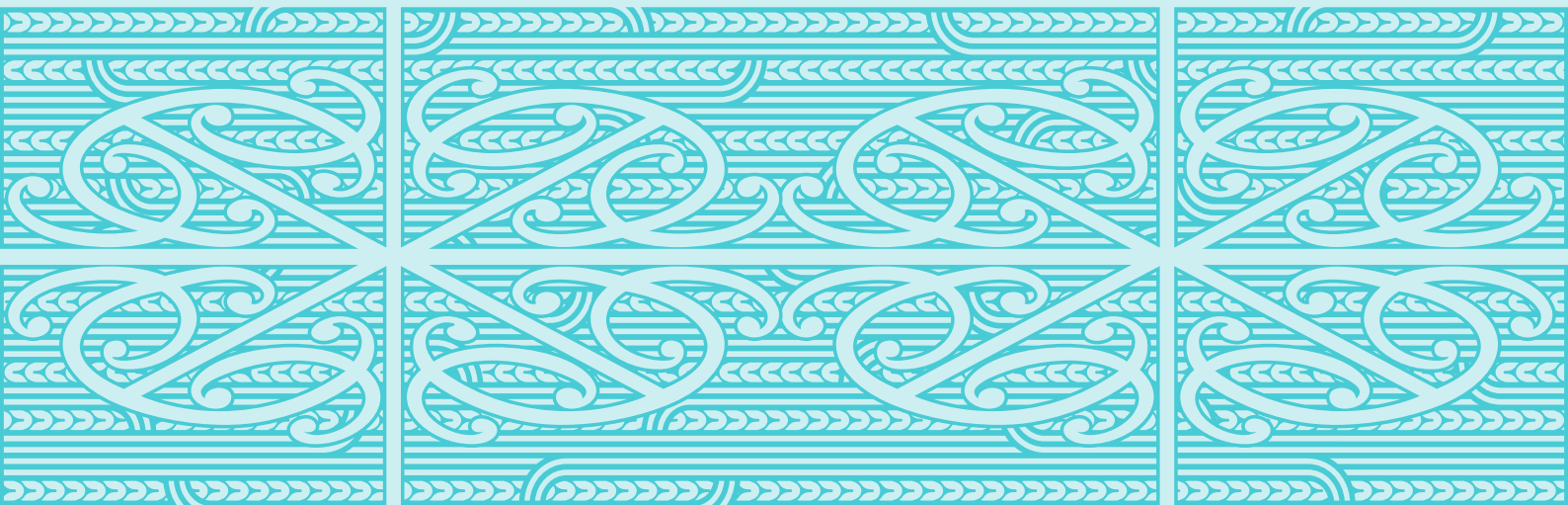


What Wellbeing@ School student data tell us about addressing discrimination in schools

Technical report

Jessie Dong, Sally Boyd, Elliot Lawes,
and Mohamed Alansari



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Key messages

Introduction

This report details the methodology and analysis underpinning an infographic research summary produced for a school audience (see Appendix 1). The infographic summary and the overall study explored students' experiences of discrimination and how school, teacher, and student practices are associated with, and mitigate, those experiences. The study used Wellbeing@School (W@S) student survey data collected between 2023 and 2025 from 108,379 students across 643 New Zealand primary, intermediate, and secondary schools.

We explored three questions:

1. What is the prevalence of discrimination in schools?
2. To what extent are various school and student characteristics associated with higher or lower levels of discrimination?
3. Are there school, teacher, or student practices associated with lower levels of discrimination?

An indicator of discrimination

As an indicator of the prevalence of discrimination, we used students' responses to the question *"Do other students say mean things about your culture or family?"*

Students who reported experiencing this behaviour at least monthly were classified as experiencing discrimination at school relating to culture or family. On average, 20% of students reported at least monthly experiences of this form of discrimination.

Some students were more likely to report experiencing this form of discrimination

- Students who identified as "another gender" were more likely to report experiencing this form of discrimination (31%) than boys (22%) or girls (15%).
- In terms of ethnicity, students who identified as Pacific were the most likely to experience this form of discrimination (25%), followed by Asian (23%), and Māori (22%).
- For some ethnic groups, younger students (Years 4–8) were more likely to experience this form of discrimination than older students. This was particularly the case for Pacific and Asian students. Māori students reported similar levels across all years.
- Students at schools with more Equity Index (EQI) barriers were more likely to experience this form of discrimination (24%), compared with those at schools with moderate (20%) or fewer barriers (16%).

Tackling discrimination depends on a mix of school-wide, teacher, and student actions

We applied Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to W@S data to examine how school, teacher, and student practices were associated with students' reports of discrimination. The findings suggest that tackling this form of discrimination requires connected actions across the school community.

- **School climate matters:** When a school feels safe, fair, relationship-focused, and culturally inclusive, this sets a positive tone for both teachers and students.
- **Teachers play a big role:** Teachers help create this positive climate in their classrooms. They model inclusive behaviour, respond quickly when issues arise, and help students learn strategies to deal with discrimination.
- **Students' peer culture and their capabilities also act to decrease discrimination:** Discrimination is less common when students treat each other in ways that reflect the school's values. If students feel they can express themselves and seek help, this also helps reduce discrimination.

Some schools were more successful at tackling discrimination than others

Based on the SEM modelling findings, we looked more closely at how these associations appeared at the school level. In the 10% of schools with the lowest reported levels of discrimination, only 10% of students reported experiencing discrimination at least monthly. In contrast, in the 10% of schools with the highest reported levels of discrimination, this proportion rose to 27%.

Summing up

This study shows that discrimination is common in New Zealand schools; however, some schools are more successful at tackling it than others. Everyone in the immediate school community (school leaders, teachers, and students) has a role to play in reducing discrimination.

These findings highlight some important equity issues. Students who identified as another gender, or as Pacific, Asian, or Māori, reported more experiences of discrimination than other students. These findings suggest it is important for schools to actively model and embed gender and culturally inclusive practices in order to better tackle discrimination aimed at these students.

Differences in the level of discrimination reported by students of different ethnicities and year levels suggest that education and support aimed at tackling discrimination may need to be focused and timed differently so it can be better tailored to when different groups of students are most likely to be experiencing discrimination related to their culture or family.

1. Introduction

Introduction to the study

The study used data from a new Wellbeing@School¹ (W@S) sub-aspect (construct) added to surveys in 2021, called *Fairness and racism*. The main focus of this sub-aspect is exploring students' capabilities in dealing with discriminatory and racist behaviour. We wanted to understand whether these capabilities are associated with the amount of discrimination and racism students experienced, and whether school and teacher practices also made a difference.

Understanding these interactions is important, as experiencing discrimination and racism has many harmful impacts on young people. Recent findings from the Growing Up in NZ (GUiNZ) study at age 15 (Neumann et al., 2026) show that discrimination negatively impacts students' sense of safety and belonging at school, as well as their learning and mental health. The GUiNZ team found that school was the most common place in which students experienced discrimination.

There is a range of definitions of discrimination and racism. The definitions we drew on for this study are shown below. For reasons that are described later in this report, we use the term "discrimination" to refer to students' experiences.

Definitions

"Discrimination" is a broad term that covers a wide range of differential treatment related to personal characteristics. *"... discrimination is when you are treated differently and unfairly compared to others because of a personal characteristic such as your race, sex, or age."*²

"Racism" is a particular systemic form of discrimination related to ethnicity. Racism has been defined as *"a network of disadvantage and differential treatment embedded in power structures and systems, and perpetrated by individuals with power upon marginalised groups and individuals from within those groups."*³

In New Zealand, the fact that many Māori, Pacific, and Asian children and youth experience differential treatment, often described as racism, is widely documented (Bishop et al., 2003; Calder-Dawe et al., 2022; Crengle et al., 2012; Mana Mokopuna—Children and Young People's Commission, 2024; Simon-Kumar et al., 2022). The series of Youth2000 surveys (Simon-Kumar et al., 2022) show the ongoing negative impact of colonisation on Māori and some groups of immigrant students. Māori, and students from minority groups such as Pacific peoples, were more likely than students who were "perceived as white" (p. 1130) to experience structural discrimination enacted by teachers, police, and healthcare providers.

1 <http://www.wellbeingatschool.org.nz>

2 <https://tikatangata.org.nz/human-rights-in-aotearoa/what-is-unlawful-discrimination>

3 https://wellbeingatschool.org.nz/sites/default/files/documents/Racism-in-schools-Rapid-review-working-paper_0.pdf

The summary of an analysis of school discipline data quoted below also shows differential treatment of Māori students. This type of inequity is historically understood as racism, and as an ongoing consequence of colonisation:

In 2022, Māori students were stood down, suspended, excluded, and expelled at about twice the rate for NZ European students. (ERO, 2024, p. 79)

Purpose of this report

This report presents an analysis of W@S student survey data collected between 2023 and 2025. The analysis draws on responses from 108,379 students across 643 New Zealand primary and secondary schools.

The purpose of this report is to provide the methodology and analysis underpinning the infographic research summary presented in Appendix 1. It also presents additional findings from the analysis that were not included in the infographic summary report because of space limitations.

Research questions

The following research questions shaped the analysis:

1. What is the prevalence of discrimination in schools?
2. To what extent are various school or student characteristics associated with higher or lower levels of discrimination?
3. Are there school, teacher, or student practices associated with lower levels of discrimination?

2. Background and measures

What is Wellbeing@School?

The W@S toolkit provides survey tools and processes that New Zealand schools can use to collect data and conduct self-review. The W@S surveys are psychometrically robust instruments (Ferral et al., 2012).

Most of the survey content explores the extent to which students and teachers perceive that different aspects of school life create a safe and caring social climate that deters bullying and therefore provides a foundation that supports learning. The W@S aspects (see Appendix 2) were developed from research findings about the protective factors that foster a positive school climate, such as a sense of safety and belonging, trusting relationships, and culturally responsive practices. A positive school climate is associated with lower levels of bullying behaviour (Denny et al., 2009; Jang-Jones & McGregor, 2019) as well as a range of positive education-related outcomes for young people (OECD, 2023).

The surveys also include an aspect that measures students' and teachers' experiences of the main forms of student aggressive behaviour that together constitute bullying behaviour.

There are two survey forms for students: a Primary Survey for students in Years 4–8; and an Intermediate/Secondary survey for students in Years 7–13. Schools can decide which form they want to use. The two forms mostly contain parallel items with language appropriate to each age group. The Intermediate/Secondary survey includes a few additional items that are more appropriate for older students.

All schools that use the W@S tools receive confidential online summary reports of their data. Student reports provide summaries by characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and year level. The reports are archived on the W@S website, and schools can access information resources and a helpdesk. The website is designed to support schools in using data within a suggested self-review cycle.

The methodology

Because the W@S aspects were not specifically designed with the intent to answer our research questions, we used an exploratory data analysis approach. In particular, we did not rely solely on the existing aspects and measurement scales. Instead, we used student responses and created revised measures to explore our research questions.

This study draws from the methodology used to develop a prior infographic: *Making a difference to student wellbeing* (Lawes & Boyd, 2017)⁴ and the associated technical report (Lawes & Boyd, 2018).

4 <https://wellbeingatschool.org.nz/sites/default/files/documents/Student%20Wellbeing%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf>

The Fairness and racism sub-aspect

As part of a wider refresh of W@S in 2021, a new sub-aspect was introduced into the student and teacher surveys: *Fairness and racism*. The sub-aspect included a mix of new and existing W@S items. The development of new items for this sub-aspect was informed by a rapid literature review (Alansari et al., 2020) and supported by an advisory group.

The *Fairness and racism* sub-aspect explores students' perceptions of the extent to which difference is valued at their school and whether they feel able to use a range of strategies to address discriminatory or racist behaviour. Table 1 shows the six items in this sub-aspect.

TABLE 1 *Fairness and racism sub-aspect items*

Item	Item is new or existing
At school, I am encouraged to share things about my culture and family	New
I can talk to my teachers about racist things (like people being mean to others because of their skin colour)	New
I feel safe to speak up if something seems unfair	New
I can stand up for people if their culture is being put down	New
At school, I am taught that it's OK to be different from other students	Existing
At school, I am taught what to say or do if students are hassling or bullying me	Existing

An indicator of discrimination

Initially, we positioned this study to focus on students' experiences of racism so we could explore factors that might help reduce racism in schools. However, we found that students' responses to the indicator item below suggested they were interpreting it more broadly. Therefore, in this report we use the term "discrimination" to refer to students' experiences, acknowledging, for some groups, they will be experiencing racism.

As an indicator of the prevalence of one form of discrimination, we used an item from the W@S Aggressive student behaviour scale, which relates to students' cultures: **"Do other students say mean things about your culture or family?"**

In the survey, students were able to pick from one of the following response options for this item:

- Almost every day (*at least monthly experiences of discrimination*)
- 1 or 2 times a week (*at least monthly experiences of discrimination*)
- 1 or 2 times a month (*at least monthly experiences of discrimination*)
- 1 or 2 times a year
- Never or hardly ever.

If students selected one of the top three responses in the list above, we defined them as having "*at least monthly experiences of discrimination*". We examined students' experiences of discrimination across a range of demographic variables. Students' responses suggest that they interpreted the term "culture or family" broadly. Many appeared to interpret this term as relating to their ethnicity.

In addition, one of the main findings of this study was that a high proportion of students, across all ethnicities, who identified as “another gender” reported experiencing this form of discrimination. This suggests these young people could be interpreting “culture or family” as related to their identity as members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Takatāpui, Queer, Intersex, Asexual/Ace, and + for additional identities (LGBTQIA+) community.

3. Data and methods

The Wellbeing@School data used for this study

This study used W@S student survey data collected over 2023 to 2025. Two student survey datasets were combined for the analysis: the Primary Student Survey, completed by students in Years 4–8, and the Intermediate/Secondary Student Survey, completed by students in Years 7–13.

To provide a broad picture of discrimination across primary, intermediate, and secondary school settings, data from both survey forms were merged into one dataset for analysis. For schools that used the W@S tools more than once during the 2023–25 period, only the most recent year of data was retained. This ensured that each school contributed one set of responses to the final dataset.

We only included state and state-integrated schools in the analysis. Private schools were excluded because their contexts, approaches, and resourcing may differ from those of state and state-integrated schools. Records with missing responses to any of the six *Fairness and racism* items were also excluded to provide a complete dataset for the analysis of discrimination-related experiences and practices.

Three survey items appeared only in the Intermediate/Secondary Student Survey. These items were excluded so that the analysis was based on comparable measures across the combined dataset.

After cleaning, the final dataset included 108,379 students from 643 unique schools. This includes 46,956 students from 492 schools that used the Primary Student Survey and 61,423 students from 217 schools that used the Intermediate/Secondary Student Survey. Some schools participated in both surveys, which is why the total number of unique schools is lower than the sum of schools across the two survey datasets. Table 2 summarises the combined datasets used for this study.

TABLE 2 Student and school characteristics in the selected W@S dataset

Variable	Category	n_responses	n_schools
Gender	Girl	55,274	636
	Boy	51,625	633
	Another gender	1,480	350
Year level	Year 4	8,037	321
	Year 5	13,493	452
	Year 6	14,540	467
	Year 7	13,770	397
	Year 8	13,478	386
	Year 9	12,025	137
	Year 10	11,000	136
	Year 11	8,645	143
	Year 12	7,726	143
	Year 13	5,502	141
Ethnicity*	Māori	21,981	631
	Pacific	11,378	567
	Asian	21,881	569
	NZ European	60,215	639
	Other**	23,901	630
EQI group	Fewer barriers	43,197	227
	Moderate barriers	52,816	297
	More barriers	12,366	119
Total		108,379	643

* Students were able to select more than one group.

** In this study, we analysed the data from the four main ethnic groups, and not the “other” category.

Analysis approach

The analysis used selected items from the W@S student surveys to represent students’ experiences of discrimination, perceptions of fairness and anti-racism strategies, and school, teacher, and student practices that may help tackle discrimination.

Most survey items used an agreement scale with four ordered response options: “Strongly disagree”, “Disagree”, “Agree”, and “Strongly agree”.

The main indicator of the prevalence of discrimination was based on the item: “Do other students say mean things about your culture or family?” This item used a frequency scale with five ordered response options: “Never or hardly ever”, “1 or 2 times a year”, “1 or 2 times a month”, “1 or 2 times a week”, and “Almost every day”. These responses were treated as ordered categorical variables in the analysis.

For modelling, this item was converted into a binary measure. Responses of “Never or hardly ever” and “1 or 2 times a year” were coded as 0, while responses of “1 or 2 times a month”, “1 or 2 times a week”, and “Almost every day” were coded as 1, indicating at least monthly experiences.

Another key measure we explored was the *Fairness and racism* factor score. This measure was based on the six items included in the *Fairness and racism* sub-aspect (see Table 1). These items explore the extent to which students’ perceived difference is valued at their school and whether they feel able to use a range of strategies to address discriminatory or racist behaviour.

The six items were examined using item analysis and confirmatory factor analysis. As the items used ordinal response scales, item analysis was conducted using a polychoric correlation matrix.⁵ The reliability analysis indicated that the items formed a coherent scale, with a Cronbach’s alpha⁶ of 0.82, suggesting good internal consistency. A confirmatory factor analysis was then fitted to estimate a latent *Fairness and racism* factor score for each student. Higher scores indicate stronger agreement with the positive fairness and anti-racism statements and, therefore, greater perceived cultural safety, support, and confidence to respond to racism or unfairness.

Structural Equation Modelling

We used SEM to examine how school, teacher, and student practices were associated with students’ reported experiences of discrimination.

The model included four main latent factors. School climate drew on items from the caring and collaborative school, safe school, and respect for culture W@S sub-aspects. Caring teaching and learning drew on items from the caring teaching and caring learning sub-aspects. Students’ peer culture and fairness/racism-related practices drew on the *Fairness and racism* items and pro-social student culture items. Students’ social strategies drew on items about expressing feelings, seeking help, and responding constructively to social problems.

The model’s outcome variable is the prevalence of students’ experiences of discrimination; that is, the number who reported monthly or more experiences of other students said mean things about their culture or family. The model tested a pathway in which school climate was associated with caring teaching and learning, which was then associated with students’ peer culture and students’ social strategies (including the items in the *Fairness and racism* sub-aspect). Gender, EQI group, and school type were included as control variables in the SEM model.

Because the W@S survey items use ordinal response scales, the model was estimated in **R 4.3** using the **WLSMV estimator** in the lavaan package,⁷ which is designed for latent variable modelling such as confirmatory factor analysis. Model fit was assessed using standard fit indices: CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR.

5 A polychoric correlation matrix estimates the correlation between the underlying continuous attitudes or perceptions that the ordinal responses are assumed to reflect.

6 Cronbach’s alpha is a measure of internal consistency. It indicates how closely related a set of items are as a scale. Values above about 0.70 are commonly considered acceptable, and values above about 0.80 are often interpreted as good.

7 The lavaan package, is a widely used R package for specifying, estimating, and evaluating latent variable models, including confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation models.

Comparing groups of schools

To better understand the relationship between reports of monthly or more frequent discrimination and practices at the school level, we conducted an additional comparison between groups of schools. Rather than comparing individual schools, which could be influenced by school-specific variation, we grouped schools with similar patterns of reported school practices and experiences of discrimination into two “mock-up school groups” and used them as illustrative examples.

First, we selected a set of four survey items that each represented a key aspect of a factor in the SEM. For each factor, we selected the item with the highest loading. A higher loading indicates a stronger relationship between the item and the underlying factor. Therefore, these items were considered the most representative indicators of their respective factors.

Then we developed a scale score to provide an indicative measure of students’ perceptions of school-level practices combined with their experiences of discrimination. A higher score indicated more positive perceptions of school practices and less frequent experiences of discrimination, while a lower score indicated less positive perceptions of school practices and more frequent experiences of discrimination.

The scores were calculated in three steps:

- *Step 1: Calculate one score for each student:* The four selected school-practice items along with the discrimination prevalence item were combined to produce an individual-level score for each student.
- *Step 2: Calculate a score for each school:* The individual student scores were aggregated within each school to produce a school-level score.
- *Step 3: Rank schools based on their school-level scores:* Schools were ranked from highest to lowest based on their school-level score. The top and bottom 10% of schools were then selected as two groups for descriptive comparison (see Appendix 1, infographic page 4).

4. Findings

This section presents the findings of the student W@S data analysis. Two types of results are presented and discussed. The first is students' experience of discrimination, measured by whether other students said mean things about their culture or family at least monthly. These findings are also the main content of the infographic summary report attached in Appendix 1. The second type of results show students' sense of cultural safety and anti-racism support, measured by the *Fairness and racism* factor score. Higher *Fairness and racism* sub-aspect scores indicate stronger agreement with positive statements about cultural safety, speaking up, teacher support, and knowing what to do when racism or unfairness occurs.

How common is discrimination?

Across the combined W@S dataset, approximately one in five students reported that other students said mean things about their culture or family at least monthly (the prevalence or outcome variable). Most students did not report this as a regular experience: around 65% said this happened “never or hardly ever”, and a further 16% said it happened “1 or 2 times a year”. However, the proportion reporting monthly or more frequent experiences of discrimination is still substantial. It indicates that cultural or family-related discrimination is a regular part of school life for a sizeable minority of students.

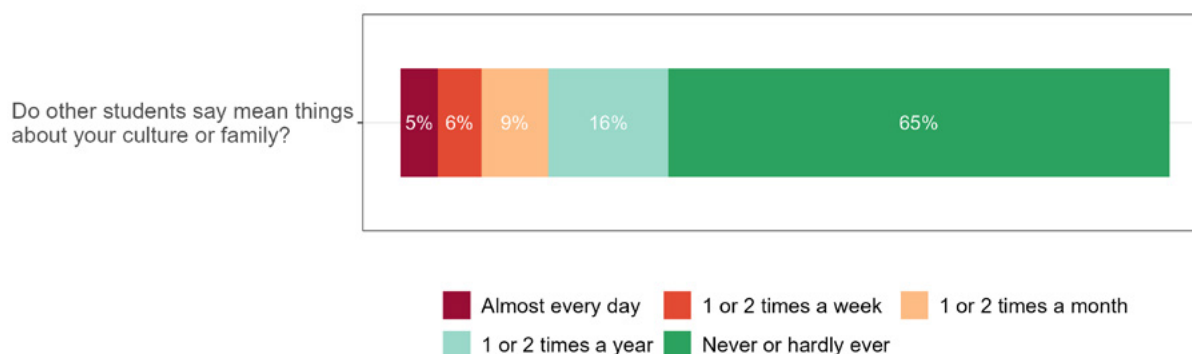


FIGURE 1 **How often students reported experiencing mean comments about their culture or family**

When we looked at students' responses to the *Fairness and racism* items, although the majority reported positive perceptions, for some statements there was a substantial group that reported negative perceptions. Just over one-third disagreed that they were encouraged to share things about their culture and family at school (39%), or that they felt safe to speak up if something seemed unfair (36%). Around one-quarter disagreed that they learn at school what to say or do if students are being mean or bullying them (27%), or that they can talk to their teachers about racist things, such as people being mean to others because of their skin colour (26%).

4. Findings

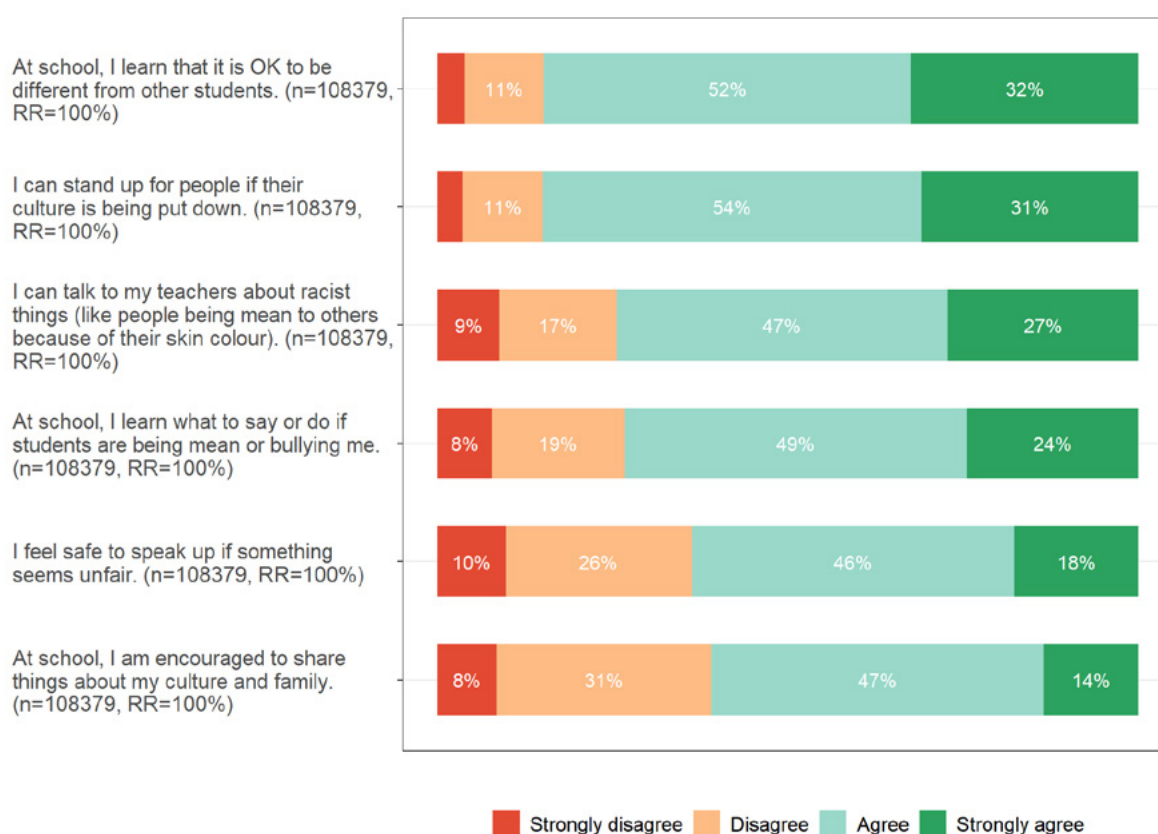


FIGURE 2 Student responses to *Fairness and racism* items

Which students experience more discrimination?

Students' experiences of discrimination varied across student groups. This section focuses on three student characteristics: gender, ethnicity, and year level.

Gender

Table 3 shows gender differences. Students who identified as another gender reported the highest level of discrimination. In total, 31% of these students reported that other students said mean things about their culture or family at least monthly, compared with 22% of boys and 15% of girls.

TABLE 3 Students' experiences of discrimination, by gender

Gender	N	Reported at least monthly experiences of discrimination
Another gender	1,446	31%
Boy	50,440	22%
Girl	54,177	15%

We also explored responses to the *Fairness and racism* items by gender. A significant association was found between gender and the *Fairness and racism* factor scores after controlling for EQI group, school type, school authority, and school-level differences. Students identifying as another gender reported significantly lower *Fairness and racism* factor scores than boys ($p < 2e-16$). Girls reported slightly higher scores than boys ($p < .001$), although this difference was smaller.

For example, 57% of students who identified as another gender disagreed that they felt safe to speak up if something seemed unfair, compared with 32% of boys and 40% of girls (see Table 4).

TABLE 4 Percentage of students who disagreed with *Fairness and racism* items, by gender

<i>Fairness and racism</i> items	Another gender disagree* (n = 1,446)	Boys disagree (n = 50,440)	Girls disagree (n = 54,177)
I feel safe to speak up if something seems unfair	57%	32%	40%
At school, I am encouraged to share things about my culture and family	56%	41%	37%
At school, I am taught what to say or do if students are hassling or bullying me	51%	26%	27%
I can talk to my teachers about racist things	42%	25%	25%
At school, I am taught that it's OK to be different from other students	39%	14%	15%
I can stand up for people if their culture is being put down	31%	17%	12%

* Disagreement levels are reported in this table, rather than the agreement levels used elsewhere in the report, because they more clearly show differences between gender groups.

Gender and ethnicity

Table 5 shows a breakdown by ethnicity of students who identified as another gender and reported at least monthly experiences of discrimination relating to their culture or family. Across all four ethnic groups, students identifying as another gender reported high levels of this form of discrimination: 54% of Pacific students, 47% of Asian students, 42% of Māori students, and 27% of NZ European students. These rates are all higher than the overall rate of 20%, with the rates for Pacific, Asian, and Māori students more than twice as high. This pattern supports the argument that, for some young people, experiences of discrimination associated with “culture or family” are connected not only to ethnicity but also to their identity as members of the LGBTTQIA+ community.

TABLE 5 **Students who identified as another gender and reported monthly or more discrimination related to their culture or family, by ethnicity**

Ethnicity	Total students in ethnic group N	Students identifying as another gender n (%)*	Another gender and reported monthly or more experiences of discrimination related to culture or family n (%)
Pacific	11,045	190 (1.7%)	103 (54%)
Asian	21,416	332 (1.6%)	157 (47%)
Māori	21,435	358 (1.7%)	150 (42%)
NZ European	59,163	909 (1.5%)	245 (27%)

* Percentages of students identifying as another gender are reported to one decimal place to allow the small differences between ethnic groups to be distinguished.

Overall, students who belonged to multiple minority groups appeared to experience much higher levels of discrimination relating to their family or culture, compared with the overall experience rate of 20%. However, it was unclear how gender identity might have contributed to this pattern. So, we took one step further to look more closely at the experiences of students who identified as another gender. We examined an additional item from the W@S Aggressive student behaviour sub-aspect: “Do other students call you gay to put you down, or are they mean to you because of your gender identity?” This item is available only for Years 7–13 students and provides a more direct measure of discrimination related to sexuality and gender identity.

We found that a total of 58% of Years 7–13 students who identified as another gender also indicated they experienced monthly or more discrimination in relation to this item. This is much higher than the overall rate among Years 7–13 students which is around 16%.

Table 6 suggests that Pacific and Māori students, who are located in more than one minority group, experienced more overall discrimination related to their sexuality or gender identity. These data highlight that some students may experience discrimination across multiple and intersecting aspects of their identity; this is called intersectionality.

TABLE 6 **Students who identified as another gender and reported monthly or more discrimination related to their sexuality or gender identity, by ethnicity (Years 7–13)**

Ethnicity	Total students in ethnic group N	Students identifying as another gender, n (%)	Another gender and reported monthly or more discrimination related to sexuality or gender identity n (%)
Pacific	6,533	142 (2.2%)	98 (69%)
Māori	11,538	264 (2.3%)	177 (67%)
Asian	12,480	251 (2.0%)	154 (61%)
NZ European	35,653	679 (1.9%)	414 (61%)

Ethnicity and year levels

Ethnicity patterns also showed differences in reports of discrimination, as shown in Table 7. Māori, Pacific, and Asian students were more likely to experience discrimination, with Pacific students reporting the highest discrimination experience of 25%, followed by Asian (23%), and Māori students (22%). It is important to note that students were able to select more than one ethnic group.

TABLE 7 Students' experiences of discrimination, by ethnicity

Ethnicity	N	Reported discrimination at least monthly
Pacific	11,045	25%
Asian	21,416	23%
Māori	21,435	22%
NZ European	59,163	16%

Year-level patterns showed a different kind of result, as shown in Table 8. The proportion of students reporting monthly or more discrimination was relatively stable across year groups, ranging from 18% to 20%.

TABLE 8 Students' experiences of discrimination, by year levels

Year group	N	Reported discrimination at least monthly
Years 4–6	35,284	19%
Years 7–8	26,773	20%
Years 9–10	22,482	19%
Years 11–13	21,369	18%

Although the overall proportion of students reporting discrimination was relatively stable across year groups, this pattern differed by ethnicity. Table 9 shows that Pacific, Asian, and Māori students reported higher levels of discrimination than NZ European students at every year level grouping.

For Pacific and Asian students, reported discrimination was highest in the lower and middle year groups, then declined in Years 11–13. Māori students reported a stable rate of 22% across all year groups, while NZ European students consistently reported the lowest rates ranging from 15% to 17%.

TABLE 9 Students' experiences of discrimination, by year levels and ethnicity

Year group	N	Pacific	Asian	Māori	NZ European
Years 4–6	35,284	27%	20%	22%	15%
Years 7–8	26,773	26%	26%	22%	16%
Years 9–10	22,482	22%	23%	22%	17%
Years 11–13	21,369	20%	20%	22%	16%
Overall	108,379	25%	23%	22%	16%

When we examine students' responses to *Fairness and racism* items, we see an interesting pattern across year levels: they decline as the year level increased. Students in Years 4–6 were consistently more positive than older students across the *Fairness and racism* sub-aspect items (see Table 10).

TABLE 10 Percentage of students who agreed with *Fairness and racism* items, by year levels

<i>Fairness and racism</i> items	Years 4–6 agree (n = 35,284)	Years 7–8 agree (n = 26,773)	Years 9–10 agree (n = 22,482)	Years 11–13 agree (n = 21,369)
At school, I am taught that it's OK to be different from other students	92%	86%	80%	78%
I can stand up for people if their culture is being put down	90%	87%	80%	80%
At school, I am taught what to say or do if students are hassling or bullying me	85%	74%	66%	63%
I can talk to my teachers about racist things	84%	76%	65%	67%
At school, I am encouraged to share things about my culture and family	73%	63%	54%	50%
I feel safe to speak up if something seems unfair	71%	62%	57%	60%

The factor analysis results were consistent with this pattern. After controlling for EQI group, school type, school authority, and school-level differences, students in Years 7–8, Years 9–10, and Years 11–13 had lower *Fairness and racism* factor scores than students in Years 4–6. This indicates that students' perceived cultural inclusion, safety, and anti-racism strategies decline as students move through school, even though the overall rate of reported discrimination experiences stayed relatively similar across year groups.

Overall, discrimination was not experienced evenly across student groups. Students identifying as another gender reported both higher monthly or more experiences of discrimination and lower *Fairness and racism* scores. Māori, Pacific, and Asian students reported more discrimination relating to their culture or family than students in their comparison groups. Across year levels, the main difference was the decline in students' sense that school is a culturally inclusive place where they feel safe to use anti-racism strategies.

Did schools vary in the amount of discrimination reported?

EQI groups

There was little variation in student data by school characteristics such as school location, type, and authority. However, students' experiences of discrimination differed by EQI group. EQI group is a school-level measure of socioeconomic barriers faced by the school community. In this analysis, schools were grouped into three categories: fewer barriers, moderate barriers, and more barriers.

Students in schools with more barriers were more likely to experience discrimination at least monthly. This was reported by 16% of students in schools with fewer barriers, 20% of students in schools with moderate barriers, and 24% of students in schools with more barriers, as shown in Table 11. One explanation for these differences is that high EQI schools tend to have higher Māori and Pacific enrolment; that is, they have more students who experience monthly or more discrimination.

TABLE 11 Students' experiences of discrimination, by EQI groups

EQI group	Number of student responses	Never or hardly ever	1 or 2 times a year	At least monthly
More barriers	11,964	60%	15%	24%
Moderate barriers	51,745	65%	15%	20%
Fewer barriers	42,354	67%	16%	16%

Table 12 shows that student responses to *Fairness and racism* items also differed across EQI groups, although the pattern was not linear. Students in schools with fewer barriers were the most likely to agree with the items, and students in schools with moderate barriers were the least likely. Students from schools with more barriers were in the middle position. This pattern of students in schools with moderate barriers being the least likely to agree with wellbeing-related items has been shown in previous W@S analyses (Lawes & Boyd, 2018), suggesting that these schools may be missing out on support and resources related to student wellbeing, or could benefit from more focus on student wellbeing.

TABLE 12 Percentage of students who agreed with *Fairness and racism* items, by EQI groups

<i>Fairness and racism</i> items	Fewer barriers agree (n = 42,354)	Moderate barriers agree (n = 51,745)	More barriers agree (n = 11,964)
At school, I learn that it is OK to be different from other students	88%	82%	85%
I can stand up for people if their culture is being put down	87%	83%	84%
At school, I learn what to say or do if students are being mean or bullying me	78%	70%	75%
I can talk to my teachers about racist things	77%	72%	73%
At school, I am encouraged to share things about my culture and family	65%	57%	65%
I feel safe to speak up if something seems unfair	66%	62%	65%

What school, teacher, and student practices are associated with discrimination?

Figure 3 shows the SEM used in this analysis. The model explains how school climate, teaching practices, and students' peer and social strategies are related to students' experiences of discrimination. SEM includes predictor variables that are modelled as influencing or being associated with another variable in the model. A mediator is a variable that helps explain how, or through what pathway, a predictor is related to an outcome. In this model, school climate is modelled as a predictor, and caring teaching and learning, students' peer culture, and students' social strategies are modelled as potential mediators. Students' experiences of (monthly or more) discrimination relating to their culture or family is the prevalence or outcome variable. The arrows show the estimated relationships between the factors, with the standardised path coefficients presented alongside them. The five practices with the highest loading for each factor are shown in Appendix 3.

The model showed a strong overall fit to the data. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.982) and Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI = 0.983) were both high, and the RMSEA (0.060) and SRMR (0.044) show a good fit (Little, 2013).

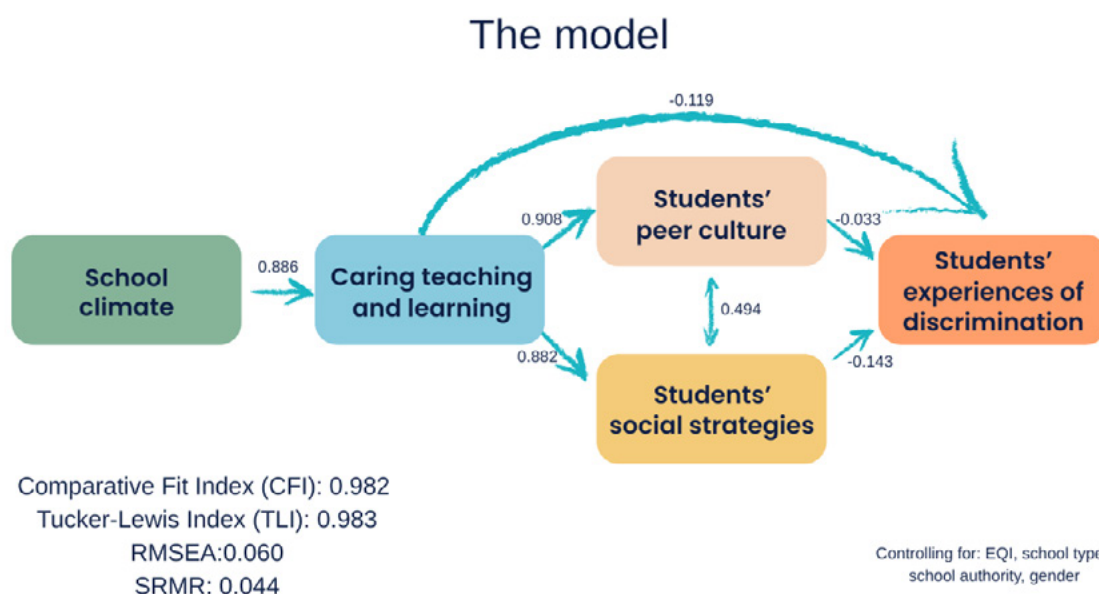


FIGURE 3 The SEM results showing pathways and associations among the factors

Note: .1 = weak, .3 = moderate, .5 = strong

Schools, teachers, and students all have key roles in tackling discrimination

The SEM model highlights the importance of school climate with a strong association found between school climate and caring teaching and learning (standardised estimate = 0.886). This suggests that students who reported a more positive school climate were also much more likely to report caring teaching practices.

Caring teaching and learning was a central factor in the model. It had very strong positive associations with students' peer culture and fairness and anti-racism support (0.908) and students' social strategies (0.882). These were the strongest associations in the model, suggesting that teacher practices are likely to be influencing peer culture and students' confidence in responding to discrimination and social problems.

The direct associations with students' experiences of discrimination were smaller, but they were in the expected direction. Caring teaching and learning was directly associated with lower reported discrimination (-0.119), and students' social strategies also showed a negative association with discrimination (-0.143). This suggests that students reported less discrimination when they also reported more caring teaching practices and more focus on learning social strategies.

The association between peer culture and discrimination was also negative, but very small (-0.033). This suggests that peer culture may still play a role, but its direct relationship with reported discrimination was weaker than the role of caring teaching and learning or students' social strategies.

Summing up the three main pathways in the model

Overall, this model shows three main pathways that influence the amount of discrimination experienced by students. First, school climate is linked to students' experiences of discrimination through caring teaching and learning. A more positive school climate appears to support stronger teaching and learning relationships, which then reduce experiences of discrimination.

Second, school climate mediates discrimination by positively influencing caring teaching and learning and students' peer culture. This suggests that a positive school climate appears to strengthen teaching practices that help build a more positive peer culture, which is then associated with fewer experiences of discrimination.

Third, school climate mediates discrimination via caring teaching and learning, as well as students' social strategies. This suggests that a positive school climate and teaching practices may support students to develop stronger social strategies, which are also associated with fewer experiences of discrimination.

In summary, the model suggests that schools, teachers, and students all make a difference to students' experiences of discrimination. Teachers appear to play a particularly important role in the model, as caring teaching and learning is more strongly associated with both students' peer culture and students' social strategies, which represent two pathways through which school experiences are related to students' experiences of discrimination.

Positive and supportive relationships with teachers and peers reduce students' experiences of discrimination

To help answer research question 3 and provide recommendations about school practices that can assist in tackling discrimination, we took a further step to unpack the SEM modelling. For this part of the analysis, items with the highest loading in the modelling were selected as indicators of school practices that tackle discrimination.

We aggregated the survey results from two comparison groups of schools based on the combined school-level score described in Section 3. The first group included the 10% of schools with the highest scores, representing a more positive overall pattern of school practices and lower reported discrimination. The second group included the 10% of schools with the lowest scores, representing a less positive overall pattern of school practices and higher reported discrimination. These groups were used as illustrative examples to compare patterns of school practices and students' experiences of discrimination.

In the higher-scoring school group (low discrimination), an average of 10% of students reported experiencing discrimination at least monthly. As shown in Table 13, 93% agreed that teachers and students cared about each other, 89% agreed that teachers cared about how they felt, 82% reported that they could ask teachers for help if they had a problem with another child, and 78% reported that students treated each other with respect.

In contrast, an average of 27% of students reported experiencing discrimination at least monthly in the lower-scoring school group (high discrimination). As shown in Table 13, 65% agreed that teachers and students cared about each other, 59% agreed that teachers cared about how they felt, 54% reported that they could ask teachers for help if they had a problem with another child, and 35% reported that students treated each other with respect.

TABLE 13 Comparison of school groups reporting high and low levels of discrimination

Example practice	Schools with high discrimination (agree)	Schools with low discrimination (agree)
Teachers and students care about each other	65%	93%
Teachers care about how I feel	59%	89%
If I have a problem with another child, I feel I can ask teachers for help	54%	82%
Students treat each other with respect	35%	78%

5. Discussion

These findings show that monthly or more discrimination relating to culture or family is a regular part of school life for a sizeable number of students. Students' experiences of discrimination varied across gender, ethnicity, and year level. The model suggests that reducing discrimination requires a whole-school approach which includes actions related to strengthening school climate, promoting caring teaching and learning, and building students' peer culture and social strategies. Some practices that this analysis indicated are important are described below (see Appendix 3 for examples of the survey items related to each area).

School climate matters

When students experience their school as safe, fair, relationship-focused, and culturally inclusive, this appears to set a positive foundation for both teaching practice and student behaviour. A strong school climate helps create shared values and expectations, as well as an everyday environment needed to reduce discrimination.

Teachers play a central role in turning school-wide values into daily practice

Through caring relationships, inclusive modelling, and timely responses to problems when they arise, teachers help students understand what respectful behaviour looks like. They also support students to develop practical strategies for responding to discrimination, seeking help, and standing up for others.

Students' peer culture and social capabilities are also important

Discrimination is less common when students treat each other with respect and when peer norms reflect the school's values. Students are also better placed to respond to discrimination when they feel confident expressing themselves, asking for help, and taking action when something unfair happens.

6. Limitations

Because the W@S data used in this analysis come from participating schools rather than a nationally representative sample, these results should not be interpreted as national prevalence estimates. Instead, they provide a large and useful evidence base for understanding how common discrimination-related experiences were among students in the schools included in this study. This analysis also provides an indication of common practices that could support schools to tackle and reduce discrimination.

The SEM results should be interpreted as evidence of associations and pathways that are consistent with the hypothesised causal relationships in the model. These results help identify how school climate, teacher practices, student peer culture, and student social strategies are related to, and mediate, students' reported experiences of discrimination. It is important to note that, although the SEM results provide strong evidence of the associations among the factors in the model, causal effects were not estimated or established from the analysis. Other explanations or factors not included in the model may also contribute to the observed relationships. However, the model does align what is known about effective school practice including the importance of culturally responsive and relational teaching practices in creating a caring school climate.

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1: **Infographic research summary**

The full PDF is available at: <https://wellbeingatschool.org.nz/sites/default/files/documents/Dealing-with-discrimination-lessons-from-student-experiences.pdf>

W@S Discrimination

Research on student experiences of discrimination
Schools, teachers, and students matter

Defining discrimination

“Discrimination is when you are treated differently and unfairly compared to others because of a personal characteristic such as your race, sex, or age.”¹

Tackling discrimination is **important** because it impacts negatively on students’ sense of safety, belonging, learning, and mental health.²



ONE IN FIVE

students reported at least monthly experiences of discrimination relating to their culture or family.



108k+
students

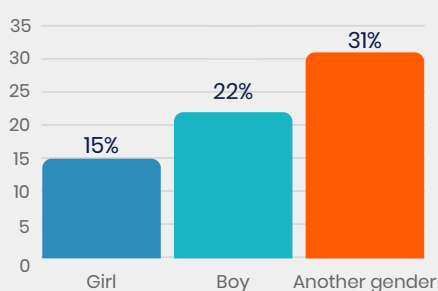
643
primary and
secondary schools

Wellbeing@School student survey data from 2023–2025

This resource draws on over 108,000 student responses from more than 640 primary and secondary schools to show how schools, teachers, and students all have a part to play in tackling discrimination.

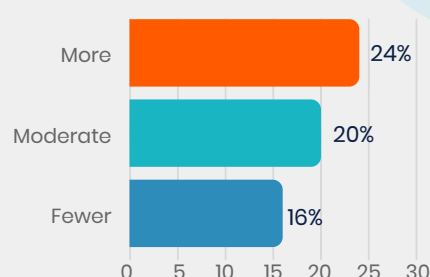
Who experiences the most discrimination at school?

The proportion of students in population subgroups who reported at least monthly experiences of discrimination relating to their culture or family.



Gender patterns

Students who identified as **another gender** experienced the most discrimination.



EQI group patterns

Students at schools with **more barriers** reported more discrimination.

	Pacific	Asian	Māori	NZ-European
Years 4–6	27%	20%	22%	15%
Years 7–8	26%	26%	22%	16%
Years 9–10	22%	23%	22%	17%
Years 11–13	20%	20%	22%	16%
Overall	25%	23%	22%	16%

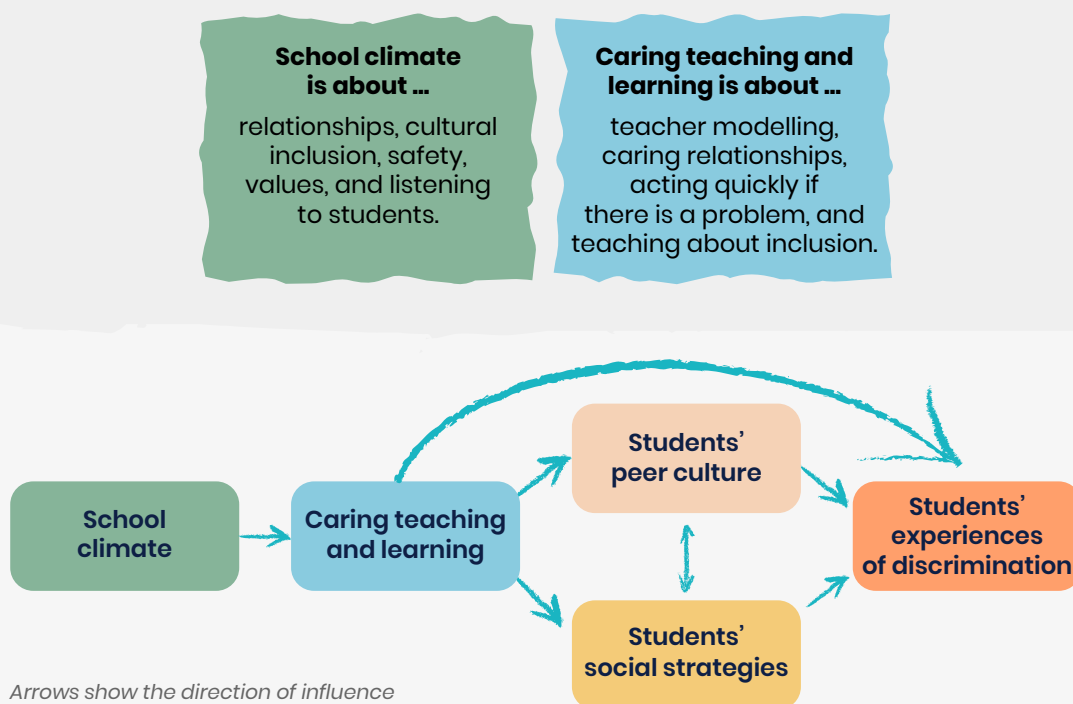
Pacific, Asian, and Māori students experienced a higher degree of discrimination, more commonly in lower year levels.

What helps to tackle discrimination?

We used the data to model connections and pathways. We found that tackling discrimination depends on the interactions between a range of school, teacher, and student practices.



The model



Students' peer culture is about ...

students including, supporting, and respecting their peers.

Students' social strategies is about ...

knowing how to express feelings, seek help, and stand up for others.

Students' experiences of discrimination is ...

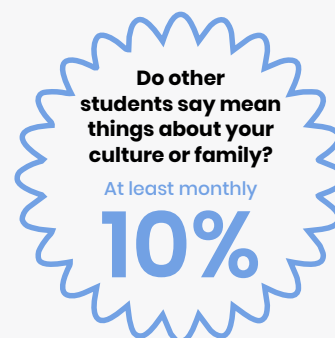
the number of students who reported that other students said "mean things about your culture or family" at least monthly.

What do students think and experience?

Two stories about discrimination

Schools with **low*** discrimination

Example practices	Agreement
Teachers and students care about each other.	93%
Teachers care about how I feel.	89%
Students treat each other with respect.	78%
If I have a problem with another child, I feel I can ask teachers for help.	82%



**From the 10% of schools with the lowest discrimination*

Schools with **high†** discrimination

Example practices	Agreement
Teachers and students care about each other.	65%
Teachers care about how I feel.	59%
Students treat each other with respect.	35%
If I have a problem with another child, I feel I can ask teachers for help.	54%



†From the 10% of schools with the highest discrimination

Schools, teachers, and students all make a difference to discrimination

School climate matters

A school-wide climate that is relational, fair, safe, and culturally inclusive sets the tone for teachers and students.

Teachers play a big role

Teachers model and create this climate in their classrooms. They also support students to develop strategies to address discrimination.

Students' peer culture and their capabilities act to decrease discrimination

If the student culture mirrors the school climate, then discrimination is less common. If students feel they can express themselves, and seek help, this also helps.



What can our school do to tackle discrimination?

School-wide climate matters

Reflection for leaders

How does our school make sure discrimination is noticed and addressed?

How do we seek students' ideas for building a safe and inclusive climate?

In what ways do we act on students' suggestions and report back to them?

Teachers play a big role

Reflection for leaders

How do we model to teachers the value of caring and inclusive behaviours?

Reflection for teachers

How do we show students that difference is valued and respected?

How do we actively address discrimination if we see it in our classroom?

Students' peer culture matters

Reflection for leaders

How do we show students that listening, inclusion, and respect matter?

Reflection for teachers

In our classes, how do we teach students to include others and stand up for others?

Students' social strategies matter

Reflection for leaders

What resources do we provide to help students develop social and emotional strategies?

Reflection for teachers

In our classes, how do we help students learn strategies for expressing their feelings and seeking help?





For more information about the tackling discrimination study and other W@S background resources see:
<https://wellbeingatschool.org.nz/other-ws-resources>



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Wellbeing@School: Evidence for a safe and supportive school

Wellbeing@School (W@S) is a free self-review toolkit for schools. The surveys in the toolkit explore factors that create a foundation for student learning (such as a sense of belonging and safety at school).

The toolkit is confidential, locally designed, and managed by NZCER. W@S offers practical evidence-based tools, resources, and services, a 5-step self-review process, and information about how to get started.

The W@S site also houses the Inclusive Practices Toolkit. Both toolkits can be used by schools to confidentially store data, access data reports, find suggestions for next steps or actions, and track changes over time.

The W@S website and services are funded by the Ministry of Education.

<https://wellbeingatschool.org.nz/>



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APPENDIX 2:

W@S student survey aspects and sub-aspects

Aspect	Sub-aspect
School-wide climate and practices	Caring and collaborative school
	Safe school
	Respect for culture
	Fairness and racism
Teaching and learning	Caring teaching
	Caring learning
Prosocial student culture and strategies	Pro-social student culture
	Students' social strategies
	Resilience strategies
Community partnerships	
Aggressive student culture	

APPENDIX 3: SEM model factor loadings

Factor	Highest loading items/practices	Loading
School climate	Teachers and students care about each other.	0.729
	Teachers ask for our ideas about how students can get on better with each other.	0.701
	Teachers get on well with students from different cultures and backgrounds.	0.686
	Our school values are important to everyone.	0.651
	I feel safe at school.	0.647
Caring teaching and learning	Teachers care about how I feel.	0.818
	Teachers treat all students fairly.	0.789
	Teachers always behave how they would like us to behave.	0.734
	Teachers think all students can do well.	0.733
	Teachers always take action if someone is being hit or bullied.	0.729
Students' peer culture	Students treat each other with respect.	0.767
	Students include others who are being left out.	0.759
	Students always stand up for other students if someone is mean to them.	0.737
	Students are good at listening to each others' views and ideas.	0.731
	Students treat teachers with respect.	0.699
Students' social strategies	If I have a problem with another child, I feel I can ask teachers for help.	0.816
	I can say how I am feeling when I need to.	0.793
	If I have a problem with another child, I feel I can ask other students for help.	0.717
	I can stand up for myself in a calm way.	0.680
	If other students are mean to me, I know how to ignore them or walk away.	0.645

