

# Pūtahi Rangahau Ngātahi Centre for Community Research and Evaluation



## Building Confidence to Strengthen School Engagement

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School engagement refers to the degree to which students are involved in and committed to their learning. It has three interconnected dimensions: behavioural engagement (participation and positive conduct), emotional engagement (feelings of connection to teachers, peers, and school), and cognitive engagement (investment in learning, self-regulation, and persistence) (Fredricks et al, 2004; Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; Karababa, 2022; Tait et al, 2023).

High engagement has been consistently linked with positive outcomes. Students who are engaged attend more regularly, stay motivated, and achieve better academic results (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Engagement is also associated with lower dropout rates, higher wellbeing (Estévez et al, 2021), and protection against both externalising behaviours such as substance use and internalising difficulties such as anxiety and depression (Mihalec-Adkins et al, 2020).

Because engagement reflects how young people interact with school, it can be influenced by the supports they receive. Positive Youth Development (PYD) programmes strengthen engagement by building confidence, competence, and connection. These approaches view adolescents as assets with strengths to develop, supporting both academic success and wellbeing (Buenconsejo & Datu, 2024).

This factsheet reviews evidence on the relationship between self-confidence and school engagement, focusing on early adolescents aged 9–12. These “middle years” are a critical transition where students test their abilities, form identities, and build skills that lay the groundwork for future success.

### The Challenge

In Aotearoa New Zealand, school engagement has become a pressing concern. In 2023 the country recorded the highest dropout rate in a decade, with 21.4% of students leaving before the age of 17—rising to over 36% for Māori students (Education Counts, 2024). Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) noted that disengagement in the middle years was strongly linked to early leaving, low qualification levels, and reduced opportunities later in life.

Research has shown that self-confidence is a key predictor of engagement. Bosacki (2003) found that preadolescents with higher levels of self-worth and belief in their abilities showed stronger academic performance and prosocial behaviour, while those with lower confidence often avoided participation to reduce the risk of failure. Disparities in engagement were also clear. Growing Up in New Zealand (2023)

reported that Māori students showed the lowest levels of engagement, while Asian students showed the highest. Cisgender girls tended to be more engaged than cisgender boys, but transgender and nonbinary youth reported the lowest engagement overall. Students with additional learning needs, such as Autism, ADHD, or emotional and behavioural challenges, also reported lower engagement than peers without such needs.

These statistics demonstrated that disengagement was concentrated among groups already facing structural inequities, and that confidence was a key factor influencing whether students connected positively with school. The challenge set for this review was to understand how self-confidence and school engagement are linked, and what this means for the design of youth programmes.

### School Engagement and Self-Confidence

School engagement is multidimensional, encompassing behavioural, cognitive, and emotional dimensions (Tait et al, 2023). Behavioural engagement includes attending school, following rules, and participating in class. Cognitive engagement refers to investment in learning, through self-regulation, effort, and strategy use. Emotional engagement reflects positive or negative feelings about school, teachers, and peers (Fredricks et al, 2004).

Confidence, defined as a general sense of self-worth and belief in one's ability to succeed, influenced all three dimensions (Buenconsejo & Datu, 2024). A positive self-concept was shaped by belonging, curriculum relevance, and supportive relationships (Purdie et al, 2000). Students with higher confidence levels showed a stronger outlook on the future and greater persistence with goals (Bosacki, 2003).

Evidence illustrated this connection across contexts. A study in the Philippines found that students with higher self-esteem and self-efficacy reported greater motivation, effort, and participation in school activities, and lower levels of anxiety and depression. Mihalec-Adkins and Cooley (2020), studying American adolescents in foster care, found that self-esteem predicted engagement: young people with low confidence often disengaged to avoid the risk of failure. In Aotearoa, Growing Up in New Zealand (2023) identified academic efficacy and academic buoyancy as two of the strongest predictors of engagement. Students who believed they could master skills and complete schoolwork were significantly more likely to stay engaged.



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# Implications for Youth Programme Development

The synthesis of evidence showed that confidence and school engagement were closely linked, shaping how students behaved, thought, and felt at school. For youth programmes, this means that building confidence should be treated as a central mechanism for engagement rather than an optional addition. Effective initiatives needed to address all three dimensions of engagement by teaching self-regulation, problem-solving, and emotional connection to learning. Particular attention was required at transition points, such as the move from primary to intermediate school, when engagement often faltered and anxiety could rise; programmes that prepared students for these shifts and equipped them with coping strategies were more likely to sustain participation. Because confidence was also shaped by relationships and belonging, programmes needed to strengthen connections with peers, teachers, families, and communities. Finally, given that Māori, Pasifika, gender-diverse, and neurodivergent learners reported lower levels of engagement, programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand needed to be culturally responsive, embedding Te Tiriti o Waitangi commitments and Māori and Pasifika values into both design and delivery to ensure equity and relevance.

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| <b><i>Support students during school transitions</i></b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce group programmes that prepare students for the shift from primary to intermediate and secondary schooling.</li> <li>• Use approaches that teach problem-solving, emotional regulation, and confidence-building to reduce anxiety and strengthen self-esteem (Brouzos et al., 2020; Miers et al., 2013; Cohen &amp; Smerdon, 2009)</li> </ul> |
| <b><i>Integrate confidence-building into programme content</i></b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use value-based education such as storytelling and role modelling to reinforce qualities like resilience, bravery, and integrity (Kuperminc et al., 2011; Vincent, 2019; Purdie et al., 2000).</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for students to set goals and experience success, building self-efficacy.</li> </ul>                                   |
| <b><i>Teach self-regulatory strategies explicitly</i></b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equip students with tools for planning and monitoring their learning, such as goal-setting exercises, journals, and self-assessment rubrics (Patrick et al., 2007).</li> <li>• Embed reflection and feedback so students can track progress and adjust strategies.</li> </ul>  |
| <b><i>Embed cultural responsiveness in PYD programmes</i></b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborate with whānau, hapū/iwi, and Pasifika communities to co-design initiatives that affirm cultural identity and belonging (Highfield &amp; Webber, 2021; Purdie et al., 2000).</li> <li>• Incorporate Māori and Pasifika values into programme delivery to enhance confidence, engagement, and wellbeing.</li> </ul>                            |
| <b><i>Empower youth as partners in programme design</i></b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involve young people in planning and decision-making to ensure their perspectives are central (Morton &amp; Montgomery, 2011).</li> <li>• Create opportunities for youth to lead activities, shaping programmes that are both engaging and challenging.</li> </ul>   |

## Conclusion

School engagement reflects how young people connect with their learning behaviourally, cognitively, and emotionally. The synthesis of available research showed that confidence played a central role in shaping engagement, influencing motivation, persistence, and participation.

For early adolescents in Aotearoa New Zealand, this suggests that youth programmes should be designed to nurture self-worth, cultural identity, and supportive relationships, particularly for groups most at risk of disengagement. Embedding confidence-building strategies into Positive Youth Development approaches offers one pathway to sustain engagement and support both academic success and wellbeing.

The challenge now is to act on this knowledge by implementing programmes that build confidence through cultural responsiveness, youth voice, and sustained commitment. Doing so will help lay stronger foundations for young people to thrive at school and beyond.

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