

The Pathways to Resilience Research Project (New Zealand):  
*Whāia to huanui kia toa*

## Navigating the Education System

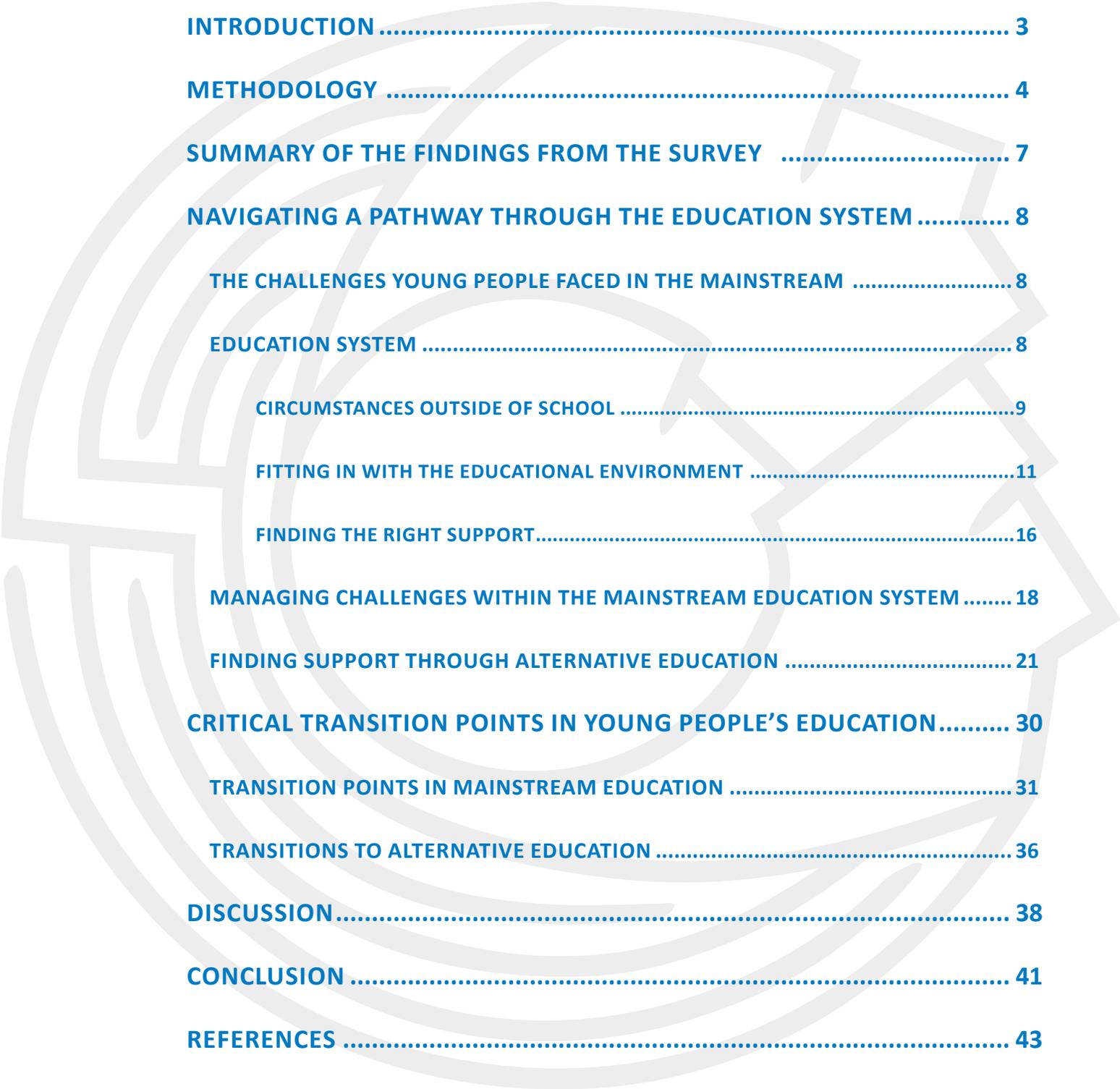
### Technical Report 8

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## INTRODUCTION

The data presented in this paper was collected as part of a larger study, the Pathways to Resilience Research Program, a five-country (Canada, China, Colombia, South Africa, and New Zealand), mixed methods study of youth resilience and risk. Data for the study was gathered between 2009 and 2013. Linked to its parent study based at the Resilience Research Centre in Halifax Canada, these were the first studies anywhere in the world that investigated the ways in which experiences across service systems influenced outcomes for youth with complex needs. Taking an ecological and youth-centred perspective, the research not only considers multiple service experiences, it also takes account of patterns within the social and material environment as well as interpersonal relationships within the lives of youth who are clients of multiple services. In this way it focuses on explaining the ways in which youth “negotiate” for, and “navigate” (Ungar et al., 2013) towards the social determinants of wellbeing with their families/whānau and the service systems that provide them with support, treatment and care.

The purpose of the study was to identify the factors that were related to the achievement of positive outcomes for youth who were users of multiple services. These were very vulnerable young people who faced a complex mix of challenges in navigating safe pathways through adolescence and into adulthood (Allard, 2007; Berzin, 2010; Rogers, 2011; Stein, et al., 2011). The study had a particular interest in explaining the ways in which the risks confronted by these youth, their resilience and wider social ecologies, combined with supportive and remedial services to create different patterns in outcomes. While data was collected from a number of sources, the research placed a particular priority upon providing spaces for youth themselves to explain their own experiences and to reflect upon the factors that made a positive difference in their lives (Bolzan & Gale, 2012;

Bottrell, 2009; Fleming, 2011; McLaren, 2002; Munford & Sanders, 2004; Sanders & Munford, 2005).

## METHODOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

The research programme approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee prior to fieldwork commencing (MUHEC approval 08/33). In addition to this University Ethical approval, ethical approval was secured from any organisation that supported the research in terms of either facilitating access to assist with recruitment or providing access to information such as case file data (see file reviews technical reports). This included Research Access Committee (RAC) approval from the Ministry of Social Development, approval from the Department of Corrections, District Health Boards, as well as approvals from schools and a wide range of NGO organisations that supported the research. The research has several distinct components:

- A survey of Multiple Service Using (MSU) and Comparison Group (CG) youth aged between 12 and 17 years;
- A survey of adults nominated by MSU youth as knowing the most about them (PMK - person most knowledgeable);
- Qualitative interviews with a subsample of MSU youth and their PMK;
- Reviews of case files held by a range of organisations that worked with the subsample of MSU youth.

Taken together, these four components constituted the New Zealand Pathways to Resilience Study. The study built upon the Canadian Pathways to Resilience study (<http://resilienceproject.org/>).

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1 A description of the methodology is provided in The Pathways to Resilience Study (New Zealand): *Whāia to huanui kia toa*: Methodological Overview: Technical Report 2.

In total 1477 youth participated in the research. All of these youth completed a questionnaire at the beginning of the study. This figure of 1477 was composed of 872 youth who formed a comparison group, and 605 (40%) youth who were the primary focus of the investigation. The 605 youth were purposefully selected because they were concurrent clients of two or more service systems; they were multiple-service using youth. The service systems included: mental health, youth justice, child welfare and educational services additional to mainstream classroom programmes. These services were provided by both statutory and non-governmental (NGO) providers<sup>2</sup>. Youth were recruited into the qualitative sample, which is the focus of this paper, from the 605 multiple-service using youth on the basis of their risk and resilience scores in the survey phase. Youth who scored above the mean on a composite risk measure and who also either scored above the mean on a resilience measure or below the mean on this measure were interviewed for the qualitative phase. Youth were interviewed by trained interviewers, and a semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the interview which covered topics such as relationships with family/whānau and peers, experiences of school and other services, the risks youth identified in their lives and how they managed these, their definitions of what it would mean to achieve successful outcomes, their understanding of health and wellbeing, and their suggestions about how effective services could be provided. Youth were interviewed individually in a location of their choosing. These interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Youth were also asked to nominate a person who knew the most about them, and this person completed a qualitative interview as well. Finally, youth were asked to give permission for researchers to access up to four of their service case files and 291 files were reviewed as part of this process. The current

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2 A description of the study population is provided in The Pathways to Resilience Study (New Zealand): *Whāia to huanui kia toa*: The Human Face of Vulnerability: Technical Report 3.

paper focuses on youth in the New Zealand sample and specifically on a subset of 109 youth whose data was used for the qualitative phase of the investigation.

Ungar and colleagues (2013) argue that in order for youth to achieve positive outcomes, resources need to be activated around them that reduce risks at the same time as support is provided which enables them to harness their own resilience resources. Youth who are most at risk of poor outcomes are typically clients of more than one service (Garland et al., 2003; Hazen et al., 2004; Jones, Gutman & Platt, 2013; Loeber et al., 1998) however, neither the significance of links between education, child welfare, mental health and youth justice system engagement nor the ways in which youth and their families/whānau experience accessing resources and supports from multiple service systems, have been systematically investigated. The Pathways to Resilience Research Programme seeks to address this gap in knowledge and the current paper focuses on one part of this larger research endeavour.

This paper examines patterns that emerged from the analysis of one thematic node in the qualitative data set, the educational experiences of young people. It draws on data from the qualitative interviews with young people. The following discussion, supplemented with examples from the young people's interviews<sup>3</sup>, explores the young people's narratives about their educational journey. It begins with a brief discussion of the findings from the survey<sup>4</sup> that pertain to young people's experiences of education. It then turns to a discussion of the young people's narratives about their experiences in navigating through the education system. It explores experiences in both mainstream education and alternative

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3 All names and identifying information have been changed.

4 See [www.youthsay.co.nz](http://www.youthsay.co.nz) The Pathways to Resilience Study (New Zealand): *Whāia to huanui kia toa*: Methodological Overview: Technical Report 2 for more information.

education. The discussion then presents the young people's narratives about their experiences of transitions in their educational journey. Transitions refer to critical points in time; for example, when young people move from one school to another or from a mainstream school into alternative education. Finally, the discussion explores the implications these narratives have for working with young people around their educational needs and goals, emphasising the ecological nature of education and the importance of activating pro-social resources and supports around young people as they move through the education system.

## **SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY<sup>5</sup>**

Statistical analysis of the survey data from the Pathways to Resilience Research Programme revealed that 64% of MSU participants had stopped attending school by year ten. For multiple-service users, leaving school was often precipitated by decisions and actions made by school personnel, such as exclusion or suspension. Of interest is that 71% of multiple-service users were stood down from school, 67% suspended, and 54% expelled or excluded from school. Comparatively, 18% of youth in the comparison group were stood down, 14% suspended and 8% expelled or excluded from school.

Of the MSU group, 47% had achieved NCEA Level 1, which is a key entry point for later qualifications (see [www.youthsay.co.nz](http://www.youthsay.co.nz) Educational Services in New Zealand for more information on qualification pathways in New Zealand). Despite this, 82% of multiple-service users aspired to gain further qualifications.

One third of the MSU participants (34%) remained positive about their last or current school and one third (37%) reported feeling a

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5 See [www.youthsay.co.nz](http://www.youthsay.co.nz): The Pathways to Resilience Study (New Zealand): *Whāia to huanui kia toa*: The Human Face of Vulnerability: Technical Report 3.

sense of belonging at their school. Comparatively, 71% of youth in the comparison group remained positive about their school and 68% felt a sense of belonging at school.

Multiple-service users were six times more likely to use alternative education services than those in the comparison group, and were five times more likely to receive support from special education services.

These findings from the survey illustrate a disparity between the educational experiences of multiple-service using young people and their comparison group peers. Other research has shown that leaving school early and with few or no qualifications has long term implications for young people, as they seek employment and further training. Young people who leave school early are more likely to be in lower paying jobs, and may face challenges in finding and retaining employment (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Polidano, Tabasso & Tseng, 2013). As such, finding ways to encourage young people to remain at school is central to being able to address some of the challenges these young people face later in life. The narratives explored in the remainder of this paper shed some light on the experiences of multiple-service using young people as they negotiate for resources and support and navigate a pathway through the education system.

## **NAVIGATING A PATHWAY THROUGH THE EDUCATION SYSTEM**

### **The challenges young people faced in the mainstream education system**

The young people in the research experienced an education system that did not always work for them. They often had to work hard to find a place where they felt they belonged, and where their

educational needs would be met. Sometimes, the complexities and challenges they faced in their lives meant that education could not be a priority for them. Some were required to take on extra responsibilities outside of school, such as looking after younger siblings, while others had other significant challenges such as managing their experiences of the foster care system or addressing mental health needs. Some of the young people had educational needs that were not recognised and addressed, meaning that they fell behind their classmates and struggled to catch up academically. All of these factors contributed to young people feeling that they did not 'belong' at their school. They often felt that their peers and teachers did not understand their experiences and their circumstances and they often felt judged and labelled as different from their peers. The following narratives introduce a number of young people who, for various reasons, found it challenging to fit in with the mainstream education system. These young people illustrate how circumstances outside of school, the perceived attitudes of others, and feeling understood or misunderstood impact on a young person's educational experiences.

### *Circumstances outside of school*

Many of the young people faced challenges outside of school, which impacted on their ability to engage with their school work. Melissa was one young woman who struggled to maintain her involvement with school due to the challenges she faced at home with her family/whānau:

*Melissa: My [family/whānau members] need mental health counselling, and trauma counselling, family counselling, drinking counselling, yea.*

*Interviewer: So it sounds like it's pretty full-on for you, and that stuff makes it hard to concentrate at school too*

*aye?*

*Melissa: Yea, 'cause I got such a short temper and if I don't know something I'm like [grrr] and start getting angry and then just walk out of the class, yes. I wasn't really teacher's pet.*

Another young person who was unable to remain engaged with education was Kylie. Kylie became involved with youth justice services, and found that she was unable to complete her exams due to this involvement:

*Interviewer: Did you take any exams when you were [at school]?*

*Kylie: No, I was in Youth Justice, I got arrested, and I got sentenced to YJ in December and I think that was the day of the last exams. But yea I'm not sure. I went to a couple, I went to one I think. But there was no real point, 'cause I didn't attend much of that year anyway. Yea, but um yea. It did change once I got ah out on bail. I had a lot of other things to worry about and school wasn't a very happy place for me after that, yea.*

Isabelle also found that she was unable to remain at school due to the impact her life outside of school was having on her concentration and behaviour:

*Interviewer: What caused you to fall out of school?*

*Isabelle: Oh, I just couldn't behave myself at school... I think it was the home things coming into school.*

Simon also found that his home life and the social pressure he felt at school made it hard to continue to attend. His behaviour reflected

the challenges he was managing outside of school, and ultimately resulted in him getting excluded:

*Simon: I guess I liked it [school] when I was five but I remember um feeling social pressure and shit like wanting to fit in or be the coolest... I guess I started misbehaving started being a dick to my teacher 'cause all the home problems and shit I guess I just took out on everybody else.*

For young people like Melissa, Kylie, Isabelle, and Simon, their experiences outside of school made engaging with school a significant challenge, as they felt that their attention needed to be focused on managing the challenges they were facing. These young people often experienced schools as places that were unable to meet their needs. They felt that the school environment was unable to provide the support and resources that would enable them to manage the challenges they faced outside of school. When young people experienced challenging circumstances outside of school that restricted their ability to engage with school, they often developed a dislike of education. Many of the young people reported that such situations became too much for them to successfully manage and for many their unmet needs outside of education led to them leaving school or trying to find ways to manage their own education through correspondence or alternative education.

### ***Fitting in with the educational environment***

Some young people struggled to find an educational environment that they felt would support their educational needs. This included being able to develop positive relationships with peers and feeling that school was a safe place to be. Rhiannon experienced a challenging school environment when she started high school. She

found that this influenced her attitude towards school, as she became increasingly drawn into the activities of her peers:

*Rhiannon: I didn't really like going to school, I hated school. Like I liked school until I finished Intermediate and then went to College. When I went to College there were security guards at my school...there were kids selling drugs at my school. Smoking [drugs] on the field at school, selling cigarettes and stuff. I was like, okay, like no-one in my class listened to the teacher and then I started kind of getting picked-on 'cause I was like quite brainy and I was real good at school so I just stopped, I stopped being good. I started stealing and my mum and dad's drugs and taking them to school and selling them at school. And I just started being real naughty.*

Jason also found that the school environment impacted on his ability to stay in school. He felt that he did not fit in with the community or his peers, which led to him behaving badly as a way of coping:

*Interviewer: What was happening for you at, when you started not enjoying school?*

*Jason: Ah it's 'cause most of the time I came late and I always got detention after school...I just didn't like aye, I knew no-one, like a fresh new boy just started school and knew nobody... [And] I didn't like the area that I was in, didn't like the school at all. 'Cause there was too much violence around for me.*

*Interviewer: Okay, was there anybody ah that you could talk to at that time.*

*Jason: Nah, no-one would believe aye 'cause I used to lie a lot... [So] I just kept to myself. Try to stick it out there for a few days you know, try to suck it up 'cause I know that school is important so, it just all too much and I didn't know what to do so I started doing stupid things to get me into trouble... Like stealing... wagging school... smoking drugs and drinking.*

**Kate found it hard to stay at school because she felt like she was not supported by her teachers or her friends:**

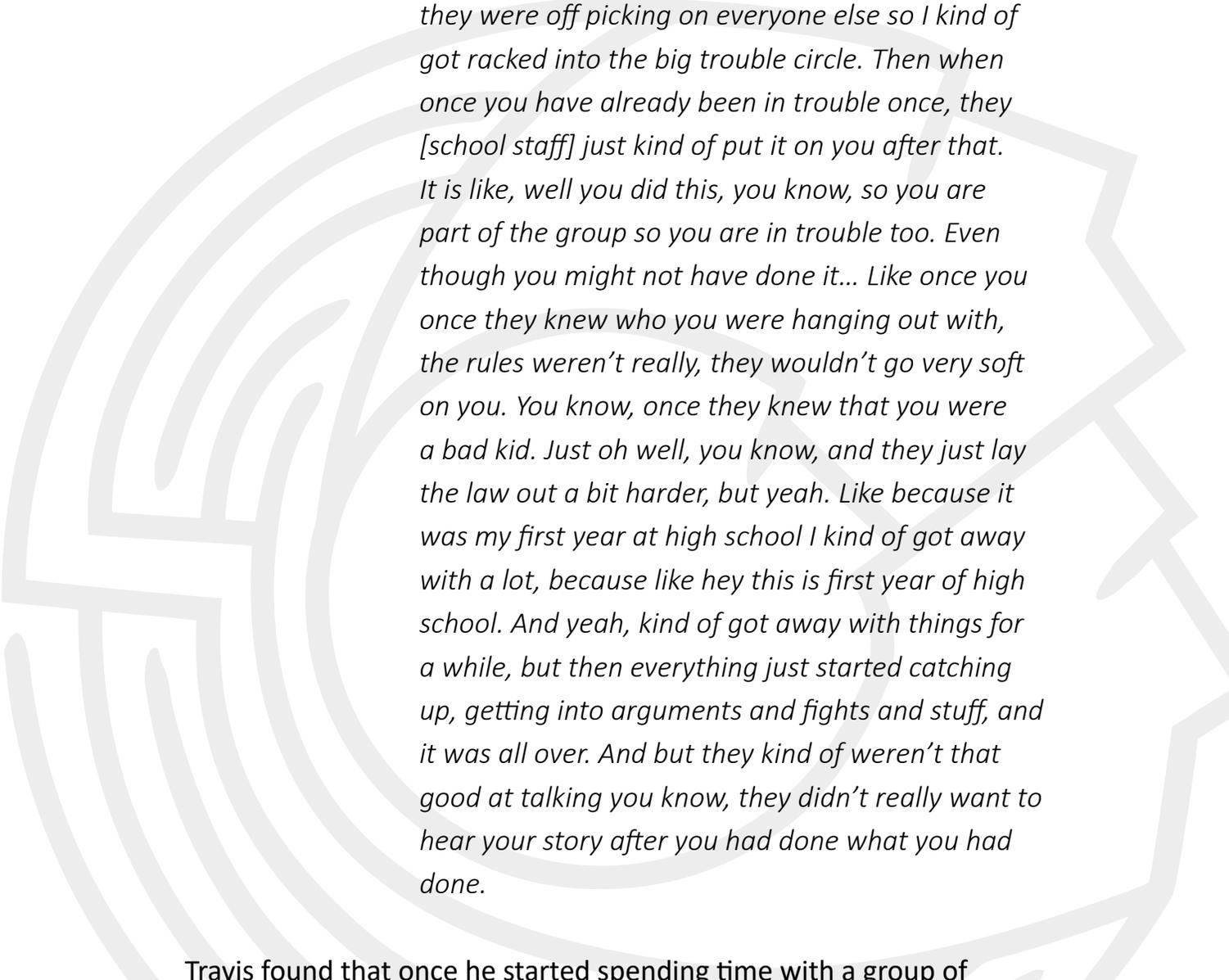
*Kate: [I found it hard to stay at my first school] 'cause before I got kicked out mum was going to send me to [another school] but like 'cause we heard all the stories about [the other school] you know, it's a dumb school, and I thought 'oh no I'll go to [my first school]' but um now that considering that I have been to [the other school] I would have gone there in the first place 'cause I reckon I would have stayed there longer, 'cause I noticed that when I went there I focused more...*

*Interviewer: So do you feel like maybe you were more supported with your school work or?*

*Kate: Yea I think that and 'cause I had like more actual friends. Like true friend that wouldn't like you know turn around on you and stab you in the back.*

**Travis also shared his experiences of the influence friends can have on a young person's ability to stay engaged with school:**

*Travis: They [my friends] were the just bad types I guess.*



*The ones that would always pick on everyone else as it was. So I got into that group of friends and they were off picking on everyone else so I kind of got raked into the big trouble circle. Then when once you have already been in trouble once, they [school staff] just kind of put it on you after that. It is like, well you did this, you know, so you are part of the group so you are in trouble too. Even though you might not have done it... Like once you once they knew who you were hanging out with, the rules weren't really, they wouldn't go very soft on you. You know, once they knew that you were a bad kid. Just oh well, you know, and they just lay the law out a bit harder, but yeah. Like because it was my first year at high school I kind of got away with a lot, because like hey this is first year of high school. And yeah, kind of got away with things for a while, but then everything just started catching up, getting into arguments and fights and stuff, and it was all over. And but they kind of weren't that good at talking you know, they didn't really want to hear your story after you had done what you had done.*

Travis found that once he started spending time with a group of students who were known to be the 'bad kids' by the school staff, he was also labelled as 'bad' and felt that this impacted on his ability to stay at school. He felt that teachers were more likely to blame him for things that were done even when he was not involved in the 'naughty' behaviour. They rarely took the time to listen to his story. Young people like Travis often felt that it was easier to behave in ways that reinforced the labels that were being ascribed to them, as it allowed them to retain a sense of power over their educational

engagement. However, this often limited the options young people had regarding their education, as they were suspended or excluded from school for their behaviour and lack of engagement in classroom activities and in their school work.

For young people like Rhiannon, Jason and Kate, finding that the school environment did not support their learning and struggling to fit in with the other students at the school meant that they felt isolated. These young people developed a range of ways of managing their feelings. Many began to engage in behaviour similar to that of their peers in order to fit in, such as using drugs, as Rhiannon did, or being a bully, as Travis did. Others tried to manage their needs on their own, like Jason did; however, they often found this was difficult and began to behave in ways that they knew would draw attention to their needs, such as truanting and vandalising or stealing school property. Young people like Kate left the school they were attending and found another pathway into education, such as moving to another mainstream school, enrolling in correspondence school, or attending alternative education courses. The young people were sometimes supported to access these pathways by staff at their school. For example, Rhiannon's teacher suggested that she could try another high school when she began to take drugs to school. Other young people were assisted by their family/whānau. For example, Jason was encouraged to attend an alternative education course by his sister.

Another group of young people found that they struggled to feel like they fitted in with the school community; they did not see themselves reflected in the culture or physical appearance of the school. This contributed to a sense that they did not 'belong' there. Michael shared his narrative of feeling isolated within the school community after he came to New Zealand from another country:

*Michael: It was kind of hard for me [at high school] because it was my first time to [this country] and I didn't know any English and plus the kids there were like no other kids that are like*

*kids [from my country], from the community so it was hard for me there.*

John also found that he did not fit in with the school community. This resulted in him feeling like the people at his school succeeded in 'getting rid' of him:

*Interviewer: What was school like for you?*

*John: Yeah, people are racist, where I went to... [People at school] are trying to get rid of people [from my community].*

*Interviewer: So it was pretty stink being there 'cause you thought they were trying to get rid of you?*

*John: Oh well they did get rid of me.*

Young people like Michael and John highlight the importance of having someone 'like me' within the school community. The feeling that there was no one who shared a similar cultural background contributed to a sense of isolation. This relates to the feeling of not having one's experiences outside of school understood by teachers and peers. Having the right support to address these concerns significantly influenced young people's sense of belonging at their school. The next section discusses young people's experiences of working to find the support that they felt they needed to remain engaged with education.

### ***Finding the right support***

A common theme that emerged in the young people's experiences of mainstream education was a feeling of lack of support to achieve educationally. Many of the young people had access to extra support through teacher's aides or counselling staff; however, the young people did not always view this as the most accessible or appropriate support for their needs. Ethan's experiences illustrate this:

*Ethan: I think the thing I struggled with most was home work, because no one was really willing to teach me, and I was frustrated. I don't know how to teach myself.*

Travis also found that he needed extra support to achieve educationally. However, he found that a teacher's aide did not provide him with the support he felt he needed most:

*Travis: [Having a teacher's aide] was helpful in the classroom, but your normal peers were looking at you like you were a retard or something. 'Cause you have to have a person following you around 24/7 and you can't exactly go up to someone and have like a conversation with them when you have got this person going with you and standing there next to you all the time. I dunno, it just wasn't for me you know. Like kind of ruining my privacy with someone else being there all the time.*

For the young people in the research, having access to appropriate support to meet their needs, both educational and otherwise, was fundamental in successfully navigating a pathway through the education system. The young people who shared narratives of not having access to support they felt was appropriate and helpful, often developed negative attitudes towards education, fell behind their peers academically, and began to disengage from education. The young people found that they had to work to find a place within the education system where they could access the support they needed, both through formal systems (such as the Ministry of Education and other educational services<sup>6</sup>) and through informal networks such as peer groups. The narratives of young people like Kate illustrate the

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6 See [www.youthsay.co.nz](http://www.youthsay.co.nz): Educational Services in New Zealand.

importance of having a supportive group of friends, while the narratives of young people like Travis illustrate the impact of a peer group who is not pro-social and supportive of education. The young people in the research managed their educational needs in a range of ways. Some managed within the mainstream education system, changing schools and talking to their teachers to arrange extra support. Other young people found that they needed to leave the mainstream education system and access support through alternative education. This will be discussed later, in the section on finding support through alternative education.

### **Managing challenges within the mainstream education system**

Young people managed the challenges they faced in the mainstream education system in a variety of ways. Some of the young people managed their needs by talking to their teachers and arranging to receive extra support. For example, Tara found that she was struggling to pass tests at school, as her teacher was unable to read her handwriting. She talked to her teacher about this, and was able to negotiate to have a teacher's aide support her during tests:

*Tara: My science teacher arranged for me to have a teacher's aide while I did my test, which was very helpful. 'Cause I was quite good at science, but I couldn't spell half of the things that they were called.*

*Interviewer: So your teacher arranged for you to have a teacher aide come in and help you when you're sitting tests.*

*Tara: Yup oh we would, they would get me and we'd go to another isolated location 'cause she would read the questions to me and write the answers as I said them to her...Which helped and that happened while she was my science teacher, but then the*

*teachers changed and people changed and just kind of faded out.*

As Tara pointed out, one of the challenges of having a teacher's aide was the lack of ongoing support once she changed teachers; young people found that it was challenging to continue to achieve when the supports they received changed or were removed at the end of each year. Often the young people had to form relationships with new support people at the beginning of each year at school, which further added to the stress. As Travis pointed out previously, having a teacher's aide during school hours was a support, but it also contributed to setting the young people apart from their peers and marking them as different. As such, the young people felt that it was important to have a relationship with someone at the school who understood what they were experiencing and how the teacher's aide was supporting them to deal with their educational and social needs. This contributed to their sense of belonging at school, and supported them to access meaningful support to meet their needs. For example, Travis found that having a school staff member who understood his special educational needs and his behavioural challenges was an important resource in helping him stay engaged with education:

*I went to [a primary school] and I was there for a couple of years. Um yeah I had a real understanding with the Principal there, like, I would still go off the rails a little bit, but he put things in place, like if I did something stupid, then I wasn't allowed in my own classroom for a week... I would have to go and sit in the hallway and I wasn't really allowed to talk to anyone, and I guess that was kind of still enforcing what was happening from when I left boarding school to when I got there. And yeah it actually worked out quite well. I did get [angry] a couple of times, but he was always understanding about like*

*that I can stay sorry, and I have to write letters... I definitely had to say sorry for what I did. And ... he would sit there and he could talk to me and he would talk about it and stuff. It was just good knowing that there was someone there.*

Other young people felt that they could have received more support from school staff, and that this would have helped them to stay engaged with education:

*Rhiannon: Like I think my mum should have just put me into the Bilingual unit at school... 'Cause the teachers they kind of understand you. 'Cause they have been through most of what you have been through. But the other teachers you try and tell them something and they are just like 'no'. You try and tell them my mum can't afford to get my shoes this week that's why I am wearing the wrong shoes. [They say] 'You are on detention.' I'm not going to detention you're crazy if you think I am going to detention.*

Grace felt that being asked directly if she needed more help would have supported her to stay in school:

*Grace: Maybe [the teachers could have] asked me 'why are you wagging, do you need more help?' and then they could have given me that more help. Like just ask me 'why are you doing this?' and I could have said that I was bored and that I'm having difficulties at school, I would have said as well and um, I don't know like 'I go to class and I sit through it just to get through it but that's it' and they could have said 'well we can give you that extra help,*

*'cause we believe you know you're on the path' or something. 'Cause at the end of the day I wish I had passed, like I wish I had stayed at school like it would have been cool to be like sitting here right now going through all my school years and like got NCEA level one, two and three and you know, like I had something out of it. But now everything's like a lot harder.*

For many of the young people, the support that would have been beneficial was not readily available in a meaningful way. As such, a number of the young people in the research left mainstream education to attend an alternative education course. Many of the young people did not have a choice about moving to an alternative education course, due to the way in which the school managed the challenges. More often than not, leaving mainstream education was precipitated by school actions, such as suspension or exclusion from school. The young people often understood the reasons for their suspension or exclusion, but many felt that it was unfair that they had to leave a mainstream school and find alternative ways to continue with their learning. The next section explores the young people's experiences of finding support through alternative education courses.

### **Finding support through alternative education**

The young people in the research had to navigate through the education system to find a place where they felt their needs would be met and where they belonged. For many, this involved leaving the mainstream education system to attend alternative education courses. However, this was not always the young person's choice; many of the young people were suspended or excluded from school, leaving alternative education as their only option to continue their learning. Many young people found that being excluded or

suspended dramatically affected their motivation to remain engaged with school. Terry shared his experiences of leaving mainstream education. He found that after he was excluded from school, other schools would not accept his enrolment:

*Interviewer: I'm just wondering about your mainstream school-ing, you left at year nine didn't you; I mean what was school like for you up to that point?*

*Terry: I was hardly ever at school... I was wagging... at home or going to my mate's house... going to the mall and shoplifting... I had some good teachers [at school], but some teachers were just stroppy so [I would] get up walk out of class 'see ya later'...I was pretty much in the principal's officer most of the time... Doing my school work there, most of the days.*

*Interviewer: With being kicked out, how do you feel about that?*

*Terry: It was pretty sad, but then. I wanted to go back to school, but then oh well... I tried to get back to another school but they wouldn't accept me, so I just gave up.*

*Interviewer: Was it an alternative education [course] or was it mainstream school.*

*Terry: Back into a mainstream school.*

As Terry highlights, many of the young people tried to remain in mainstream education, but found that school were unwilling to accept their enrolment based on their history of poor behaviour and truancy. For these young people, the only option remaining open to them was alternative education. This transition did not always occur straight away; after the young person was disengaged from school a period of time would pass, often ranging from weeks to months, before they were able to enrol in an alternative education course.

Young people were often supported by others to find alternative education options. Some, like Elena, were referred to alternative education by their family members:

*Interviewer: Ok so when you were um excluded from mainstream school how did you become involved in Alternative Education?*

*Elena: Um, I think it was my older sister that enrolled me into alternative school.*

*Interviewer: And how did you feel about that when she suggested it to you?*

*Elena: Um, good 'cause after school I just did nothing; I was just a bum for the whole year. And, yea, my family just kept [asking me] 'is this what I'm going to do for the rest of my life?' And then when I got a call from alternative education they said that I would be enrolled into course and they [family] were pretty happy that I'll be back into getting into education... I was happy as well... [The tutors are] good too, they were really supportive and helped me [with my work]*

Ross was another young person who left mainstream education and began to attend alternative education. He was supported by school staff to find a course and enrol:

*Interviewer: What precipitated the shift from [mainstream school] to [alternative education]?*

*Ross: Bad behaviour... I was always wagging, smoking, drinking, all of that... I ended up getting sent down to the Dean and by this time Truancy officers had been called, [child welfare services], Police had referred me to [youth justice services], almost*

*everything really and then there was the Dean that actually mentioned this [alternative education course]... and it sounded like absolute gold to be honest. You start at nine [in the morning]... do three hours of work a day, because its correspondence work you have two hour and a half periods of study and then afternoon is just activities of whatever kind. So that sounded like pure gold really no proper homework or anything like that you could smoke there as well as long as you had your parent's consent you could smoke there, so it was a very stress-free way for me to get away from mainstream school and try and focus on getting my work done there. Sadly that didn't really work for me either and they ended up kicking me out of there within the year as well.*

Ross emphasised the fact that alternative education provided him with a 'stress-free' way to begin to focus on his school work, away from the distractions provided by his peer group at his mainstream school. Despite this, alternative education did not work for Ross, and he ended up leaving school when he was 16. Young people like Ross found engaging with education was challenging when they did not have access to supportive relationships with staff members and their peers at school. Ross was asked to leave alternative education when he began truanting from the course. He recalled feeling that the tutors at his course were encouraging of him when he was completing his work, but that they could not work with him around his attendance. He felt that there were no consequences when he did not attend course, and thus that he could 'get away with it'. Young people like Ross felt that it would have been more beneficial for them if there had been a series of immediate consequences for failing to attend a day of school or course, rather than the school contacting

their family/whānau after a period of time had lapsed. Many noted that they also needed support to get to school and stay at school during the day. However, these young people, like Ross and Grace, were often not asked why they were not attending. This meant that support to address the reasons could not be facilitated.

For many of the young people in the study, alternative education did provide them with a successful means of achieving some of their educational goals. These courses often provided the young people with access to an environment where they felt safe, accepted and supported to address their educational and other needs. The young people who had positive experiences with alternative education found that their peers were more accepting and understanding of their experiences and challenges, support for meeting needs outside of education was more accessible, and they felt that they were not labelled as the 'naughty' or 'different' students. The teaching and support staff at the alternative education courses the young people attended often recognised how unmet needs outside of school restricted young people's engagement with education. As such, the young people found that their alternative education courses provided them with access to resources such as counselling, drug and alcohol education, and information on budgeting, getting a driver's license and so on. These are the normative developmental resources that other young people at this age had access to but were often not readily available for these young people. Reuben found that the resources provided by his alternative education course supported his learning in a variety of ways:

*Reuben: [My alternative education course] is a real good school. They would bring in people that would help you in the future. They give you more information instead of the teachers explaining it they'd bring in people... Sometimes they'd get in vets to see how to*

*treat your animals, and nurses come in like once a week... We got in a gaol person once, guy that just came out of prison and then we got this group, I don't know who they were but, they were trying to teach us to have fun without violence.*

The young people who had positive experiences with alternative education courses noted that having positive relationships with staff members was of central importance to their willingness and ability to engage with their education. The young people often felt that tutors at their alternative education courses had a better understanding of the challenges they were facing outside of school, and felt that they were able to discuss their concerns with their tutors. They also felt that their tutors were more likely to 'stick by' them and provide them with ongoing support, even when their behaviour was challenging or they began to disengage from their course. It was important to the young people that the people they formed relationships with at their courses would encourage them to try again when they slipped up, rather than resorting to disciplinary actions and not addressing the underlying issues. Casey was one young woman who recalled having support from one of her tutors:

*Casey: My tutor was like 'I'm going to stick with you, I'm going to help you.' Like, I've fucked her over so many times, and she'd try to help me, but I'd turn up wasted [to course]. But she stuck by me. So that was a big thing for me, knowing that I had her no matter what.*

Timothy reflected on his feelings towards the discipline offered by mainstream education. He felt that being at alternative education provided him with a more positive learning environment, where he was not punished for struggling to stay engaged:

*Interviewer: If you look back at school, do you think that there are things that schools can do better for young people in situations like yours, to help them stay at school?*

*Timothy: Yeah. Just don't be so strict towards the kids because that will just push them away. Like they [teachers at mainstream school] just want to give you punishments and things like that. [They say] 'You deserve it'... But they have to try not to make it a bad thing all the time.*

Jason was another young person who felt that the tutors at his alternative education course facilitated his engagement in education and supported his learning. He found the support of the tutors to be relevant and responsive to his specific needs. He felt that they understood what he was experiencing outside of school:

*Interviewer: How do you feel about [your alternative education course], what was that support like?*

*Jason: Grateful as 'cause you know that the tutors are there to help you out every day... When you come to course you don't have to be on your own when you're doing work. If you're stuck on something you can just go up to them and they'll sit you down, talk to you about aye... Like they have been there in your shoes and you can open up to someone over there. Instead of like keeping yourself quiet and like bottling it up to a point where you are going to snap.*

Being engaged with an alternative education course provided many of the young people with opportunities to form positive relationships with adults and their peers, meet some of their

educational goals, and address some of their needs outside of education. Alternative education courses provided the young people with access to resources that they may not have access to through their families/whānau or through mainstream education. However, there were also many experiences and resources that the young people did not have access to after leaving mainstream education. These included being involved with sports teams, learning to play a musical instrument, and being able to engage with other activities such as speeches and drama classes. Additionally, alternative education did not always provide the young people with the same opportunities to engage with post-school qualifications as mainstream education did. For example, Tara wanted to complete a tertiary-level course for her chosen profession. However, she was initially too young to enrol in the course, and she felt that her alternative education provider was not able to provide appropriate support to help her stay engaged with education until she was old enough for the course. Tara still hoped to complete a qualification later, but felt that she had missed the opportunity to complete it without disengaging from education for a significant period of time:

*Tara: I wanted to study and I wanted to do the course but I was too young for it then... I want to get a piece of paper that tells me that I am [qualified]. I know I am but I want the piece of paper to prove it... But I'm not going to rush. 'Cause I think that's the problem, I've rushed everything else, everything else just goes so fast and then I'll rush into something and then I'll decided I don't like it. And then I'll rush into something else.*

*Interviewer: Do you think if you had someone helping you make those decisions, take a little bit longer to make those decisions about what course to go into and what suits you and how you're going to manage*

*being in a class situation, having the written work to do. Do you think it would have been a bit more successful?*

*Tara: Maybe if I could have talked to someone from [alternative education] and said 'look I need someone to help me, if you want me to do written work I need someone to help me then' with some reading or with exams or anything, if it's written, then maybe yes, it could have been different and I could have been more willing to go 'cause I wouldn't have been standing round like you know, I can't spell half of these words, so what am I meant to do... If I had that support it would have been easier [to stay engaged with education]*

The young people's narratives illustrate the challenges that young people with complex needs face in working to gain their education. The young people in the research recognised the importance of education and having qualifications, and many, like Tara, Jason and others, aspired to achieve qualifications at a tertiary level. However, the risks and challenges they faced outside of school often made achieving these aspirations difficult. The young people's narratives illustrate the importance of having access to an education system that provides them with skill-level appropriate classwork, support to address unmet needs outside of school, positive relationships with school staff and peers, and opportunities to engage in pro-social activities such as sports, music, and drama.

Support from teachers and significant others was particularly important when young people were navigating critical transitions in their educational journey, such as when they changed schools. Periods where the young people were managing a change in schools or learning environments provided the greatest challenges, and extra

support was often the key to enabling the young person to remain engaged with school. The next section discusses critical transition points in young people's education and the factors that supported or made these transitions more difficult.

## **CRITICAL TRANSITION POINTS IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S EDUCATION**

Changing schools can be a challenging experience for any young person; they have to navigate their way through a myriad of new experiences including new teachers, new peers, and a new school environment. However, for the young people in this research, the transitions they experienced throughout their educational journey were especially challenging as they often occurred alongside other life events that caused upheaval across various domains. For young people transitioning to a new school within the mainstream system, whether from primary to intermediate to secondary school, or to a new school at the same level, the move was accompanied by events such as moving to a new town, or moving in with new caregivers. Other young people moved to a new school when they were excluded from one school and told to find another school to attend. The young people discussed how they lost consistent relationships, felt like they did not belong at their new school, and migrated towards negative peer groups as they navigated their transitions into new schools. All of these experiences compounded the challenges associated with a change in school, making the period of transition traumatic for a number of the young people. These periods of transition were often the times during which young people found that it was challenging to stay at school, especially when they felt they did not fit in with the school environment and when they felt that staff and students were not supportive of them. For other young people, changes were a positive experience. These young people found that they had access to appropriate support and

felt a sense of belonging at their new school.

### Transition points in mainstream education

The following examples illustrate the transitions young people managed within the mainstream system. Often, these transition periods were precipitated by a change in the young person's life outside of school, such as moving house, which further added to the complex circumstances young people were managing. Rhiannon illustrates the complex circumstances many young people were managing outside of school, and how this impacted on her educational journey:

*Rhiannon: I went to a few schools, I can't remember how many... I moved quite a bit. My mum and dad separated when I was two and I was back and forth, mum dad, mum dad ... I was moved everywhere and by the time I would go back to mum she would be in a different house, go back to dad he would be in a different house so I was changing schools. I don't think I ever stayed in a school for a whole year... I don't have any friends from my schools. Some from my intermediate, but hardly any.*

William also had to change school regularly when he moved house with his family/whānau:

*Interviewer: So you have moved schools. Is that because you have moved places or because you have been stood down or had to move?*

*William: Because I have had to move places [with my family]... [And] I have been expelled sometimes.*

Jonathan found that staying at school was hard when he moved, as he did not enjoy his new schools:

*Interviewer: So would you say that at age 15 you've moved around a lot?*

*Jonathan: Yeah, yeah, I moved around a bit 'cause of my own trouble... troubled mates and just disliking school, I've hated schools, all the schools I went to I hated most of them.*

Mark was another young man who found staying in school challenging when he had to move to a new school. He found that his behaviour was a major challenge and he regularly changed schools which meant he found it difficult to find stability in his education:

*Interviewer: So you got kicked out of primary school, what happened? Did you go to another one?*

*Mark: Yeah, I went to [another school], 'cause I was meant to get into school so I could get into boarding school, so I went to [that school] for about a term... Then I got sent away to boarding school in [another town]... And I went to [an intermediate] and then, same thing pretty much [at every school], no one knew how to handle me.*

The young people often had to manage a number of transitions throughout their time in mainstream education. These transitions made it challenging for the young people to engage fully in their education, as they were working to fit in with peers, develop relationships with teachers and other staff, and manage their circumstances outside of school. Young people often felt that they were unsupported during the transition period to a new school. They subsequently found it challenging to remain engaged with education.

For example, Rhiannon felt that the teachers at her school did not understand how her family circumstances were impacting on her ability to engage with her education. As a result, she began to 'act out' against their requests by skipping detentions, drinking at school, and truanting. In addition to changing schools, Rhiannon had been sent to live with family members who she did not know. This upheaval in her life compounded the challenges of changing schools and trying to meet new friends. As Rhiannon said:

*I didn't really make any friends [at school] so I didn't like it. I just stopped going. I got stood down, and then trespassed from the school when I tried to go back. After that, I never went back.*

Rhiannon felt unsupported to stay in school. She believed that her teachers did not understand her background and the difficulty she faced in managing her own education. Her parents were not involved with her education, and it was up to Rhiannon to ensure that her needs were met. This eventually proved to be too challenging for Rhiannon, and she left school to find a job when she was 15.

Tara was another young person who found that it was challenging to remain at school after experiencing a change in her learning environment when she moved from year nine to year ten. Even though this transition occurred in the same school environment, Tara found that forming relationships with her new teachers and teacher's aide was a significant challenge. She left school after a few weeks in year ten, largely due to these challenges. Reflecting back on this time in her life, Tara noted that it would have been easier for her to stay at school if she had been able to have the same teacher aide supporting her throughout the transition into year ten. Having a stable and trusting relationship with a key support person was important for Tara, as it provided her with a sense of security. The challenges she was facing at home, combined with the challenges of forming new relationships at school, were too much for Tara to manage:

*Tara: [When I started year ten and my teacher's aide changed] I ended up leaving not long after that. And I kind of just let go of all my work anyway. I was just getting fed up with everything else.*

*Interviewer: So do you think if you had the opportunity to be in school again, do you think having the same teacher aide carried on through with you would have been more helpful for you?*

*Tara: Yes, 'cause then at least I would know that person, trust that person and wouldn't have the whole awkward of having to get to know them over and over again.*

The transitions young people experienced were challenging for many reasons; while Tara and Rhiannon felt unsupported by school staff, young people like Hope felt that the students and the school environment had the strongest impact on their ability to engage with their education:

*Hope: I hated high school 'cause everybody was all about gangs, colours, weed, who's the toughest, who can smoke the most, who has tobacco, who has lunch, who has money. You have to have something for them to like you. If you don't have anything they're not your friend.*

*Interviewer: So it sounds like intermediate was the safe place and when you got to high school, school wasn't really the safe place anymore 'cause all this stuff*

*Hope: 'Cause at intermediate we pretty much were our selves... So we didn't really mind, but at high school they were all about getting their respect from being the strongest. Yea, it was about gang colours.*

The changes in student culture were a strong influence on how young people viewed their experiences at school. For young people, it was important that they felt they fitted in with their peers and could see themselves reflected in the culture of the school. For many young people, managing a transition into a school where they felt they did not belong led to them leaving school, usually after being suspended or excluded from the school. Some of the young people felt that they could not cope with the transition, and started truanting and running away from school. Drew was a young woman who found the change from intermediate to high school particularly challenging. She found it challenging to navigate her way around high school, and felt that the people at school did not offer her the support she needed to manage the change:

*Drew: I was quite good at primary and intermediate. It was just when I hit high school and everything just went blah... I started running away... It's 'cause it's a new thing, and there are older people with you. Like when I was at primary, I was there and then I continued until intermediate and then I went straight to high school. So I didn't sort of transition into an intermediate. I was still in the same school, and when I hit high school, I was like what am I doing here? How do I find my way around? 'Cause it was bigger and I didn't know anything about high school.*

These young people felt that the school staff did not support them to manage the transition into a new, larger school. They found it was challenging to manage changing classrooms for each subject, and found the size of the school overwhelming. However, some of the young people found that their new school was able to put supports in place to assist them with managing the transition. For example,

Mikayla had the support of a Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour (RTL) when she moved from intermediate into secondary school.

*Mikayla: She used to be there all the time, she used to call us out of class if we were having problems and just take us away instead of us just running away from school, so at least we would still be in school.*

Having someone who she felt understood the challenges she was facing in staying at school helped Mikayla manage the transition into high school more easily. The narratives of the young people offered valuable insight into their experiences of managing their education in a system that did not always meet their needs. Many young people found the transitions within mainstream education challenging to cope with; they felt unsupported to negotiate new environments, and found that they did not always fit in with their peers. The challenges they faced often led to them feeling isolated and behaving badly to draw attention to their needs. This frequently resulted in the young people being suspended or excluded from school, leading many young people to seek support through alternative education.

### **Transitions to Alternative Education**

The young people in the study generally found that the transition into alternative education was easier to manage than transitions in the mainstream system. They felt that the staff members were more understanding and supportive, and felt a sense of belonging in this environment:

*Elena: I have learnt heaps out of school... In school like I did learn a lot but I wasn't really understanding. But when I came to course I've learnt heaps. And*

*like the tutors are really supportive, they would advise us to keep going.*

Elena felt that the tutors at her alternative education course supported her to stay engaged with her education during her transition into her course. She remembered feeling that the tutors understood what she was experiencing, and that they were willing to help her to stay at her course. Other young people were supported to attend alternative education courses by other services with which they were involved. For example, Simon was involved with a youth support service and youth justice services, both of whom worked to find a course for him to attend when mainstream education did not work out:

*Simon: When we were doing stupid shit at school.... she [worker at a youth support service] would talk to us like: 'How can we stop you guys from getting referred [to the Board of Trustees]'... she [support worker] always believed in me and thought I had some sort of potential.*

Simon's support worker provided him with access to the resources he needed to make a transition to alternative education. While Simon did not end up enjoying alternative education, as it did not offer him access to future qualifications, in the short term it enabled him to stay engaged with his education. Simon was managing a range of other challenges associated with drug and alcohol use and criminal activity that could have made it easy for him to disengage from his education if he had not had access to the support provided by his key worker.

The young people who found support for their education through alternative education providers reflected on a range of ways that they

were supported to transition out of mainstream education (refer to the section 'Finding support through alternative education' for more information about young people's transition experiences). For the majority of the young people, the transition was made necessary after they were excluded from school, as was the case for Elena and Ross. These young people were supported by a range of people to manage their transition, including key workers, family/whānau members, and school staff. However, many also felt that the support they needed was not available.

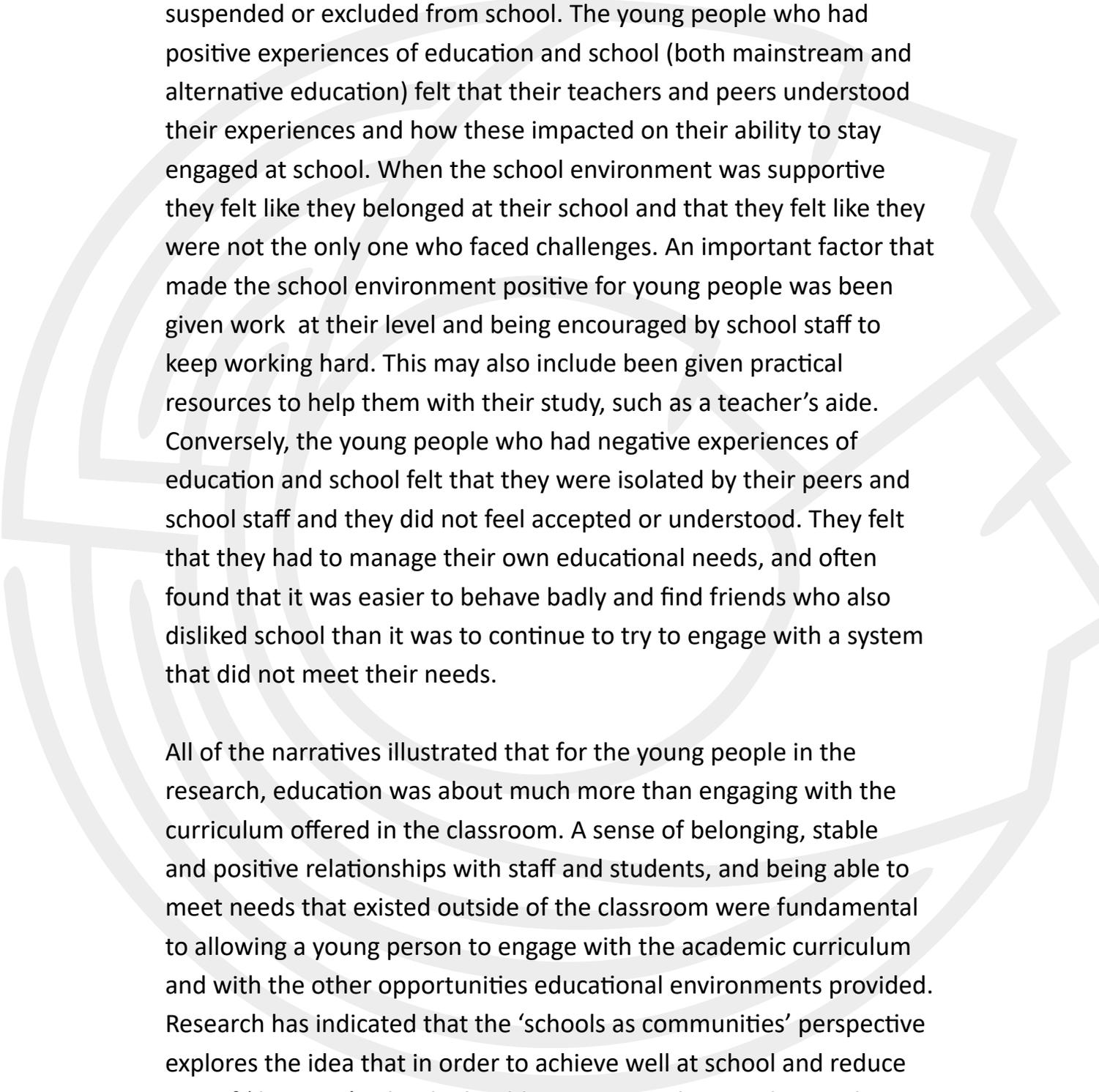
Transition points in young people's education are critical; they can be a turning point for the better, but they can also undermine progress and disrupt positive experiences at school. Transitions do not always result in young people being able to successfully negotiate a pathway into education. As seen in Technical Report 7: Making a Claim for Services<sup>7</sup> the young people were also managing other transitions in their lives outside of school. Their experiences such as transitioning between service providers and into and out of care were often compounded by other complex circumstances. These transitions were often challenging for the young people to successfully navigate on their own, and they required a significant level of support to maintain their engagement with education at these critical points.

## DISCUSSION

The young people in the research navigated a range of educational environments. They shared numerous narratives that illustrated the challenges they faced in gaining their education and the ways that they managed these challenges, either on their own or with support. A number of themes were present in the young people's narratives. These were: seeking a sense of belonging at school, finding staff

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<sup>7</sup> See [www.youthsay.co.nz](http://www.youthsay.co.nz).



members and peers to form positive and supportive relationships with, and aspiring to achieve qualifications, even after being suspended or excluded from school. The young people who had positive experiences of education and school (both mainstream and alternative education) felt that their teachers and peers understood their experiences and how these impacted on their ability to stay engaged at school. When the school environment was supportive they felt like they belonged at their school and that they felt like they were not the only one who faced challenges. An important factor that made the school environment positive for young people was been given work at their level and being encouraged by school staff to keep working hard. This may also include been given practical resources to help them with their study, such as a teacher's aide. Conversely, the young people who had negative experiences of education and school felt that they were isolated by their peers and school staff and they did not feel accepted or understood. They felt that they had to manage their own educational needs, and often found that it was easier to behave badly and find friends who also disliked school than it was to continue to try to engage with a system that did not meet their needs.

All of the narratives illustrated that for the young people in the research, education was about much more than engaging with the curriculum offered in the classroom. A sense of belonging, stable and positive relationships with staff and students, and being able to meet needs that existed outside of the classroom were fundamental to allowing a young person to engage with the academic curriculum and with the other opportunities educational environments provided. Research has indicated that the 'schools as communities' perspective explores the idea that in order to achieve well at school and reduce acts of 'deviancy', schools should promote student-student and student-teacher relationships in order to ensure that young people feel supported and connected within their school (Demantet & Van

Houtte, 2012; Libbey, 2004). This perspective is reflected in the narratives of many of the young people in the Pathways research. The qualitative interviews provided young people with an opportunity to reflect back on what may have supported them to stay at school. They identified a range of factors such as having a positive peer group and having supportive relationships with teachers. Feeling able to ask for help was also a central factor; young people like Tara often struggled to achieve academically until they talked to their teachers and arranged to receive extra support. However, as young people like Grace demonstrate, asking for help is not always easy for young people. Being able to ask for help is influenced by the type of relationship young people have with their teachers; if the young person feels that the teacher does not understand their perspective, they are unlikely to signal that they need assistance (Jobe & Gorin, 2013). Through supporting the development of positive and trusting relationships with staff, education providers may be able to better support these young people to remain in school (Allard, 2007).

Some of the young people in the research discussed feeling unsupported by their peers and school staff. When they reflected on their experiences at school, they often felt that they were misunderstood by their peers and teachers, especially within the mainstream education system. Young people like Kate, Melissa and Jason struggled to find support within the mainstream education system to manage their needs and address issues that they faced in their families and in their daily lives. These narratives indicate the need for education providers to recognise the impact seemingly unrelated needs can have on a young person's ability to engage with school. The young people who were facing significant challenges in their life outside of school were more likely to focus their attention on managing those challenges rather than on engaging in the classroom. As such, education providers could benefit from ensuring that young people have access to support to meet those needs,

within the school environment. The young people often found that alternative education courses were easier to engage with, partly because these courses provided the young people with access to counsellors for various needs, and supported the young people to find positive ways of dealing with their troubling behaviours that resulted from feeling frustrated by unmet needs (Clark et al., 2010).

The narratives of young people who discussed feeling supported in their efforts to engage with education reflected that education providers who met the needs of the 'whole' young person were the most meaningful as they enabled the young person to successfully navigate to resources and support (Allensworth et al., 2011; Clark et al., 2010). They provided the young people with access to resources such as teacher's aides, RTLBs, and counselling staff, and worked with the young person to ensure that the support was appropriate and meaningful for the young person (Clark et al., 2010; Munford & Sanders, 2011).

## CONCLUSION

There is a significant amount of research that highlights the challenges faced by young people who leave school early and with few or no qualifications. These young people have been found to struggle to find and retain employment, and are often in low-paid jobs. This can lead to social exclusion for many of these young people, as they do not have access to the social opportunities that paid employment provides (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Maguire & Rennison, 2005). Thus, supporting young people to remain engaged with education at school is fundamentally important to improving their future outcomes. Through providing meaningful support, developing positive relationships between staff and students, and recognising the importance of meeting the needs of the whole young person, education providers may be able to support multiple-service

using young people to achieve greater success in their lives.



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