Turning Points in the Lives of Vulnerable Young People

Technical Report 18

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INTRODUCTION

The data presented in this report 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; Sanders & Munford, 2005).

METHODOLOGY[1]

The research programme was 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/). 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

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.

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. Youth were recruited into the qualitative sample, which is the focus of this report, 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 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 report 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 report focuses on one part of this larger research endeavour.

TURNING POINTS

This report examines patterns that emerged from the analysis of one thematic node in the qualitative data set, turning points in young people's life stories. The defining feature of a turning point is that it causes change and influences subsequent events in a young person's life. The notion of turning points is derived from the life course perspective (Elder, 1998). The life course perspective is a key developmental theory in the sociological tradition and is used to describe the influence of transitions and changes in individual lives over time (Crosnoe & Huston, 2007; Graber & Brookes-Gunn, 1996). Holland and Thomson (2009) consider that traditional transitions (such as leaving the parental home) do not occur at the same point in the life trajectories for all youth, rather transitions may occur at any given stage in a young person's life, for example, exiting education with no qualifications, returning to education as an older adolescent, and early entry into parenthood.

This study found that transitions, both socially acceptable (for example, entry into high school) and socially unacceptable (for example, entry into juvenile justice), in combination with the skills and experiences individuals have, and the adaptations they make as

a response to transitions, constituted 'turning points' in life course trajectories (Elder, 1998; Sanders et al., 2013;). Each young person brings a unique set of individual strengths and vulnerabilities to their transitions, all of which can affect subsequent turning points in their life course. Young people, who have not been exposed to the same level of stressors and challenges as vulnerable young people, and who have strong support networks such as family/whānau, may be buffered during transitions by the presence of this consistent support and caregiver stability (Benner & Graham, 2009).

Turning points can be described as events that the young person has little control over as well as circumstances that have an element of agency, for example, death of a significant other (no control) and returning to education (agentic) (Elder, 1998; Giddens, 1991). To describe the way young people's agentic processes influenced turning points, the concept of 'wake-up calls' is explored in the young people's narratives. The idea of the 'wake-up call' is influenced by the work of Giddens (1991) who proposes that individuals embark on a 'project of self' within which they experience 'fateful moments'; "times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands at a crossroads in their existence or where a person learns of information with fateful consequences" (1991: 113).Thomson et al. (2002) extend this idea, considering that young people need to be understood as already living through the consequences of the decisions, or lack of decisions, of others and that these moments have a subjective dimension. The 'wake-up call' occurs as a, or at a critical moment in their life and is a process wherein the young person experiences insight into their current, or prior course of action and recognises the opportunities they have to act on this (Thomson et al., 2002). In this report, young people's 'wake-up calls' led to changes in their behaviour, including re-engaging with their education, desisting from offending and ending, or re-negotiating boundaries in their relationships.

Regardless of when they took place turning points and 'wake-up calls' altered young people's behaviour, emotions and subsequent experiences. The influence of turning points on their life trajectories also called for different mixes of internal and external resources. While 'wake-up calls' were appraised by the young people as insight(s) that could lead to positive change, turning points were not necessarily wholly positive, particularly those that were provoked by circumstances beyond the young person's control. What the narratives reveal is that both turning points and 'wake-up calls' are catalysts for change and can result in negative as well as positive outcomes. They thus represent important opportunities for professionals working with young people to encourage positive change.

In this report we describe how turning points and 'wake-up calls' in vulnerable young people's lives have implications for practice. We draw on the data collected from 109 qualitative interviews with vulnerable young people[2], bringing together different examples of turning points in the young people's narratives. In doing so we consider how turning points may influence change. We are also interested in differing degrees of agency and self-awareness in the young people's narratives. To explore this, we look at young people's 'wake-up calls' and explore whether a young person's ability to identify and define a turning point as a 'wake-up call' has consequences, that is, is there a relationship between young people's agency and their ability to realise opportunities and change their life course.

Discussion is organised around four key turning points that were common to all or most of the young people interviewed. The first section considers education experiences including the transition into

2 To maintain confidentiality, all identifying information has been changed or removed and pseudonyms are used.

high school and entry into alternative education. The discussion then moves to explore young people's explanations for their challenging behaviours at school, their 'back story', and the subtext that underlies turning points in education. In the final part of this section, young people's 'wake-up calls' concerning their education are discussed. The next section discusses young people's experiences of offending. Here young people's turning points associated with their involvement with youth justice are explored. In particular, the 'wake-up calls' that influenced changes in their offending behaviour are considered. The third section explores practitioners' involvement during turning points including counsellors, practitioners in mental health services and practitioners in community and statutory social services. This discussion explores young people's narratives of 'wake-up calls' that occurred while they were connected with these services. The final section considers turning points in relationships, with a focus on caregivers, bereavement, romantic partners, and parenthood. 'Wake-up calls' in relationships are also explored. Central to this discussion is young people's strategies for achieving positive behavioural changes. These youth identify that turning to, or away from relationships, facilitated these positive changes. The summary considers the implications of the narratives on turning points and 'wake-up calls' for working effectively with young people, emphasising the importance of identifying when young people may need extra support so that appropriate pro-social resources can be arrayed around them at these times in order to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes.

TURNING POINT: EDUCATION

Many young people in the study did not make it to high school or left high school before attaining NCEA Level 1[3]. This section discusses

3 NCEA Level 1 is the entry point into the New Zealand national school-based qualifications framework.

turning points in young people's educational trajectories; with a particular emphasis on the transition into high school (year nine), a time when unmet educational needs, challenges in the caregiver environment and with peers, can influence educational outcomes. Young people's explanations for their challenging behaviours at school and how this influenced their turning points in education is explored. Young people's 'wake-up calls' and decisions to return to education, both alternative and mainstream education, after a period of disengagement, is also explored (see also Dewhurst et al., 2014a).

Transition into high school

The transition from intermediate school into high school was a significant turning point for most of the young people. In Aotearoa/New Zealand year nine is typically the first year of high school and is a normative transition for young people (Benner & Graham, 2009). A large number of young people said that they started acting up and disengaging from school in year nine. They started truanting, using drugs and alcohol and associating with peers who were also disengaging from school. Several young people noted that these peers were older than them. For young people who have experienced adversity, the expectations of individual educational advancement and the interaction of this with unmet learning needs and family and personal issues, can influence their integration, socialisation and subsequent engagement with the school environment. Difficulties in these areas were noted by several young people as turning points in their education journey, and many young people engaged in a range of harmful behaviours that influenced their exclusion from school. In the following narrative, Kelly, who had experienced many challenges within her family/whānau as a child and had a strained relationship with her caregiver, describes being a good kid before the transition into high school:

I was quite good at primary and intermediate. It was just when I hit high school and everything just blah….It's coz it's a new thing, and there is older people with you… Well, it all started when I became friends with this one chick, and she was exactly the same as me ah yeah "Let's go try this and that and blah, blah, blah" and I ended up getting drunk quite a lot and things started from there.

Kelly's transition into high school was influenced by her connection with an older peer who engaged in difficult behaviours. This peer was described by Kelly as 'exactly the same as me'; indicating that they both reinforced each other's harmful behaviours. This became a turning point in her educational journey; joining in with the harmful behaviours of her peer was more salient than engaging with learning. Kelly was excluded from her school for behavioural reasons. This turning point influenced a range of subsequent challenging events in Kelly's life course. No longer being at school increased both her involvement with older peers and her drug and alcohol use. Due to several incidents concerning her safety while under the influence of drugs and alcohol, Kelly experienced another turning point when she was placed in a specialist residence where she re-engaged with her education. In the next narrative, Jasmine, who had a challenging family/ whānau history, started self-harming and expressing suicidal ideation when she was 10, also highlights the influence of peers during the transition into high school:

Interviewer: When you were at primary school – how would you describe you as a child? If you could look back and say: oh this is me at school.

Jasmine: Very smart, I was a very smart young girl, I had lots of friends, I was caring and helping – yeah.

Interviewer: And when you went to [a high school] did anything change for you?

Jasmine: Just my behaviour, my rebel-ness as a young girl.

Interviewer: What made you go into being a rebel?

Jasmine: Having older friends and an older boyfriend that liked to drink and smoke weed and party and stuff.

Achieving a successful transition into high school can be more complex for vulnerable young people. This transition involves navigating new relationships, negotiating the shifting contexts of home, peers, and the school culture, alongside the expectation that young people will effectively utilise resources in the educational environment. Successful management of these complex processes by young people results in meaningful social connections and involvement in mainstream educational culture (Fredricks et al., 2004; Phelan et al., 1991). However, this was not the case for many of the young people in this study. Older friends were able to draw both Kelly and Jasmine away from school because of unmet needs within their families/whānau; they were more vulnerable to the negative influence of, often older, peers because of troubled relationships at home and reduced capacity to manage the complex relationships they confronted at high school (Benner & Graham., 2009; Phelan et al., 1991).

Chris's narrative reveals how the social environment of his new school influenced his disengagement with education:

The issues for me, are just school aye, you know, I didn't like the new school I was going to, so I started playing-up a bit. I just started like wagging, skipping classes, getting myself into

trouble with the police and that was it. And then I just never showed up one day, and after that I started going on to weeks and then the whole term. I just didn't want to go….I just didn't like it aye, I knew no-one, like a fresh new boy just started school and knows nobody.…

For Chris, his turning point away from education involved his struggle to connect with the new school environment. This turning point was influenced by his caregiver's decision to move into a new area. As Chris's narrative highlights, young people are more vulnerable to negative consequences when experiencing turning points that are outside of their control, especially those instigated by their caregivers. Furthermore, when more than one change occurs simultaneously, vulnerable young people can find it difficult to simply adapt. They may manage difficult turning points in ways that are on one hand, troubling (e.g. truanting), but on the other hand, are an expression of their agency (Munford & Sanders, 2014).

In the next narrative, Hemi, who experienced inconsistent schooling, multiple changes in caregivers, and subsequent house moves, struggled to find school meaningful due in part to his unmet learning needs. Hemi was excluded from high school for chronic truancy in year nine. Once excluded, Hemi connected with peers who were also excluded from school and they spent their time 'getting wasted'. Hemi discusses how his educational disengagement was a sad turning point that went on to have a negative influence on his future attempts to re-engage with his education:

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

Hemi: *It was pretty sad. 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….Back into a mainstream school, I tried to get into [school name]…

Hemi's turning point and the subsequent challenges he faced were recurring themes for many of the young people in the study who disengaged from education. Once outside the mainstream educational environment many of the young people in the study connected with peers who they felt understood and validated their difficult experiences. As Hemi's narrative indicates, disengaging from school can exacerbate the negative messages many received from significant others in their lifetimes; that their issues and behaviours, while challenging, are going to continue to be misunderstood. This compounds their experience of isolation and being misunderstood, and peers who are also disengaged then become a key source of validation, albeit not always a supportive or positive influence.

For Kelly, Jasmine, Chris and Hemi, difficulties in connecting with their schools led to a range of harmful behaviours. The combination of transitioning into high school, changing schools, peer-group norms that under-value academic success, and school environments that do not address the needs of vulnerable youth, can create additional challenges and barriers for young people. When the young people in this study discussed educational disengagement as a key turning point in their lives it became clear that they embarked upon the transition into high school with a range of adverse life experiences and unmet needs. Often, this amplified their need for social acceptance with peers who had also experienced similar life challenges. Furthermore, many of these young people placed a great deal of emphasis on the importance of their peer relationships, some describing high levels of emotional distress and suicidality when relationships changed or ended. While it is developmentally normal for young people to confide in their peers more than their caregivers, for young people from difficult backgrounds the emphasis on peer

relationships is often much greater (Urry et al.,2014). By placing more importance on negative peer relationships than their own learning, young people are more likely to engage in the harmful behaviours and activities of their peers and experience problematic turning points in their educational journeys (Benner & Graham., 2009; Phelan et al., 1991).

The young people's explanations concerning their turning points in education reveal that there is always a 'backstory', a subtext, concerning the connection between their troubling behaviours and school disengagement. Despite their conflicts at school and risk behaviours, the young people did not necessarily define themselves as 'bad'. Their identities were more nuanced than this and their disengagement from school was influenced by a range of factors, such as; a sense that they did not belong, could not achieve at school, and were misunderstood and unsupported by teaching professionals. In the next narrative, Matt, who was struggling to adjust to his caregiver's decision to shift to a new city, describes connecting with peers who also felt like outsiders at school and how this had influenced his disengagement from education:

> *It was weird. I was like the new kid from [a city] and I made a very close friend, two friends actually who [disliked the school] and you know whatever I was doing out of school it was with them and they were very much in the same boat as me. We were always wagging, smoked, drinking; we would do almost everything together…*

Matt's challenging experiences of being a 'new kid' provoked feelings that he was too different and could not belong at his school. In this sense hanging out with friends who also felt disconnected was a search for belonging and connection with people who did understand. In the next narrative, Jodi highlights that stressors in her

home life disrupted her capacity to engage with school and led her to engage with a peer group that engendered a sense of belonging:

Jodi: *I had a lot of other things to worry about at home, and school wasn't a very happy place for me… I wasn't really born into the most um, best family position really. Like um my parents were both very young, and ah they couldn't take care of me at that age and they still can't take care of me, they're not mature enough to take care of me to this day.*

Interviewer: *And when you were 13 and you're saying all that stuff was happening, ah the shit was hitting the fan you said, was school still ok or, how did, did school…*

Jodi: *Um, then my schooling kind of changed. I got more into the drugs and fighting… I had problems with authority.*

Jodi was arrested around this time for aggravated assault and robbery and requested support for her mental health struggles. The stressors in her home life included multiple moves between family/whānau as a child and moving in with her biological father when she was 13. Jodi said that her father could not take care of her. As Jodi's narrative highlights, when young people with difficult background circumstances transition into high school and connect with other vulnerable peers; this becomes a powerful turning point. Forming these relationships is part of a search for meaning and connection, and can often reflect the challenges they have experienced in their lives. These experiences can contribute to feeling that they do not fit at school. As Jodi's narrative indicates, young people can displace the frustration that they have felt from and towards their caregivers

onto other adult authority figures, and the negative feedback and response they receive can reinforce that adults 'do not understand them', but friends and peers do understand (Brown et al., 2004; Urry et al., 2014; Werner et al., 2004).

Despite young people's challenging behaviours and circumstances, and the negative influence of their friends, many would distance themselves in their narratives from the 'bad' peers they associated with, citing that they did not really invest in the group's behaviours. Fay, who had been involved in risky behaviours with her peer group, and then decided to cease her harmful behaviours, highlights this:

> *And like I got on really well with [the friend] she was a really nice girl. But the people that she hangs out with. I'm not into getting really wasted and going out and getting into fights. And we'd been getting pretty wasted and she'd do something, and we'd go to town, and they'd start fights, and even if you tried to stay out of it, because you were seen with that group of people, then you get dragged into it. And I met a lot of bad people that way, and that's kind of when I thought about it, and it was just like ok, well I can keep doing this and pretend I'm 10 feet tall and bullet proof and be with these guys or I can kind of suck it up and go and talk to [another friend] and [another friend] and see if they like would consider being friends again. And I wouldn't talk to anyone, oh my god, I want to talk to you, and … sort of thing, but yeah. After that I realised that I probably wasn't ten feet tall, I needed people who I could like connect with on an intellectual, and a spiritual level.*

Fay's narrative reveals that getting wasted and into fights was not really her thing; she felt 'dragged in' to these scenarios by this peer group, and subsequently became caught up in perpetuating these behaviours. Fay's involvement with these peers and her challenging

behaviours (drunk and disorderly, running away from home) outside of school drew attention from service professionals who connected her with a counselling service for her drug and alcohol use. The initial involvement with her peers was a negative turning point for Fay, yet her subsequent entry into a counselling and treatment programme for her drug and alcohol use became a positive turning point. Fay identified that her tough behaviour came from insecurity and that she needed to allow herself to be vulnerable in order to connect with different peers, rather than connecting with peers through alcohol and violence. Fay went on to re-connect with peers who had been a positive influence in her life when she was younger and they encouraged and supported her decision to re-engage with her education and stay away from drugs and alcohol. Fay's school also responded positively at this turning point:

Interviewer: Were you expelled?

Fay: *No I had got a pretty bad reputation from [the school], but they have always stood by the idea that I could do it. I just need to buck my ideas up and perform. I could even be head girl, and get on with my studies, and then I'll be fine.*

Although not explicit in Fay's narrative, the school potentially knew Fay's 'backstory', that she was more than the sum total of her peer group's harmful behaviours. Despite her bad reputation, Fay's teachers wanted to keep her at school. For Fay it was important and meaningful that her school teachers responded positively and were prepared to support her despite her 'bad' behaviour. This highlights that the response of school personnel to a young person with challenging behaviours is critical and has the capacity to influence positive turning points in educational journeys.

In the next narrative, James explains that he had always been anxious, easily distracted and overly reactive, and as a result of this he was treated as problematic throughout primary school. This contributed to his struggles with learning in a mainstream classroom. A positive turning point in his educational engagement was being sent to boarding school at age 13. James said that he had a good relationship with the Principal, who stood by him when he acted out and kept firm rules and boundaries. The teachers and the Principal set up a coping strategy for James, for when he was feeling anxious and reactive in class. A key turning point for James was leaving boarding school at 15 years and returning to a high school in his local community. The care James had experienced in boarding school did not continue in his new school. Because of his struggles in the class environment, James was put in a class with what he described as the 'bad' young people:

> *Um, oh I reckon if you see someone going downhill and there are three classes for your year level they should obviously be looking to say we should stick this person with this person, because this person is bad, so they should be separating the bad people into three groups not bam in one. Because obviously that class is going to be a whole lot of dickheads and you are going to learn nothing. And even the people that were good in that class they would have learnt nothing all year, because we were all making too much noise. So that didn't work out too great.*

The way the teaching staff at James's new school responded to his challenging behaviours, highlights that an approach that emphasises 'what is wrong' with a young person can lead to unhelpful practices that disempower and devalue them, shutting down positive options and increasing the likelihood of further marginalisation (Benner & Graham, 2009; Fitzsimons-Lovett, 2001; Phelan et al., 1991). James's narrative supports the evidence that placing young people together

who are already struggling educationally, and then not adequately responding to their needs, can contribute to further educational disengagement (Benner & Graham, 2009; Phelan et al., 1991).

During turning points in their education, these young people's internal dialogues indicate the 'bad' status that had been assigned to them often had a very important and revealing backstory. What Matt, Jodi, Fay, and James' narratives reveal is that they knew what challenges they faced, why their behaviours were difficult and who, and what circumstances were influencing them. For some their behaviour was attributable to the influence of peers, while for others, stressors in the home environment and mental health issues constituted precipitating factors for their difficult behaviour and subsequent disengagement from school. In this sense their circumstances and behaviour were open to change when the adults around them could provide opportunities for them to discuss and address their issues and focus on the pro-social aspects of themselves (Urry et al., 2014).

Alternative education

Alternative education has been variously perceived; as a last chance for vulnerable young people and as a 'holding pen' for at-risk youth (Fitzsimons-Lovett, 2001). However the majority of young people in the study who attended alternative education saw this as a positive turning point in their education. Alternative education programmes were often the first time that young people had recognition of their unique individual needs and experienced meaningful opportunities to become involved in formal education. The change to an environment where they felt supported and accepted by the teachers provided the young people with the opportunity to access a positive new identity as a learner and to build positive, enduring relationships with professionals who brought a range of new resources into their

world. As Tess explains:

> *I wouldn't have done anything if it weren't for the Activity Centre. I was just slipping so bad at College that I just didn't care. I'd get detentions – someone would tell me to do something in class – I'd walk out. I was terrible. My whole family says they saw a change in me from when I moved from College to the Activity Centre. Especially, I grew up a lot there, I knew a lot more, and I was hanging out with better people… The Activity Centre was a real cool school…We were all really close together, there was none of that bitchiness, and there was none of that shit like normal schools. Like everyone was real nice to each other. Nobody was excluded. It was like we were a family. The teachers, the Principal, the office lady, they were all willing to help, real cool. Like 'J' called Mum the other day and said there's a course he thinks I would like to do. And it's like over a year since I was there. He hasn't forgotten me. He is still calling to see how I am.*

Successfully engaging vulnerable young people in education requires that teachers recognise their unique needs and circumstances. Young people who face challenges have been found to successfully engage with their education when teaching staff respond respectfully and with understanding to their life experiences, when the culture of the school is inclusive, and when teachers respond to young people's unmet needs (Demanet et al., 2012). Tess's narrative highlights that her re-engagement with education was reliant on the enduring presence of caring and supportive teachers. The move into alternative education was a turning point for her as she entered an environment that recognised her life experiences, her uniqueness and strengths, and gave her the opportunity to change her 'bad kid' label. For Kui, entering alternative education helped her get her correspondence work on track:

Nothing for about two years (no school) and then I went on correspondence. And then it lasted about a year, and it didn't look pretty good. The first time I tried it I wasn't too well because I was doing it at home. And there were too many distractions, so I just didn't bother to do it, so I went to this place [an alternative education centre] to do it. And I did it there, and I did it there for about a couple of months and that was really good, like I liked that place, you know, got everything done.

Kui's decision to connect with alternative education was a positive turning point, as once in this environment she was able to complete her educational tasks. Young people recognise these settings as opportunities to re-engage with their learning. Although not all young people thrive in alternative education, for those who can connect with this setting, there is a higher chance that they will participate and achieve educationally (Fitzsimons-Lovett, 2001)

Moving into alternative education was a positive turning point for many young people in this research. For Kui, the alternative education programme enabled her to complete her educational tasks away from the distractions in her home environment and this helped her fulfil her desire to complete her education. Tess emphasised that she felt socially accepted and safe at her alternative education programme and that the teachers and students were like family. Often, young people who slip through the cracks of mainstream education are considered to have done so because they 'do not care' about their education. The majority of the young people interviewed in this study stated that they cared very deeply about their education, but often faced extremely adverse circumstances that made it difficult for them to function in mainstream classrooms (Dewhurst et al., 2014).

Young people's 'wake-up calls' concerning their education

As noted above, many young people articulated a desire to re-engage with their education and this was frequently prompted by a 'wake-up call' concerning their current circumstances. For example, the narratives revealed a desire to cease their involvement with their peer group's harmful behaviours and concerns that if they continued on their current trajectory (frequently offending and drug and alcohol abuse), they were likely to experience more challenges. In the next narrative, Mel, who had been excluded from school and had subsequently become involved in offending with an older peer group, describes a 'wake-up call':

Interviewer: were you getting sick of the kids that you were hanging out with?

Mel: yeah. I was, but not the kids at [the social service for youth] that was real good…at the [social service for youth], it probably was about the last couple of weeks I thought yeah I want to go back to school. At the end of the year the [service practitioner] helped me get back into school. They got me in there….I thought yeah I have got to make this work, it is my last chance

Interviewer: oh I see, so that was like an opportunity to try again

Mel: yeah hard out. Getting back in. Try again. Get back in there and make it work really.

Mel's 'wake-up call' was prompted by several factors; she was tired of being involved with her peer group's harmful behaviours and her involvement with a youth service helped her recognise that removing

herself from her peer group and accepting support from this agency represented an opportunity to re-engage with her education. What is important in this narrative, is that Mel's 'wake-up call' was influenced by her positive involvement with a service and when she realised that she wanted to re-engage with her education, she was supported by a practitioner to achieve this.

In the following narrative, Renee describes a 'wake-up call' that occurred after many months of transience, 'being wasted all the time' and living rough. Renee had disengaged from school in year nine and following this, she connected with older peers, some of whom were drug users. Renee's drug use escalated to the point where she was stealing money off her family/whānau and was involved with youth justice. Despite her involvement with services her harmful behaviours continued. Her 'wake-up call' occurred when she saw these behaviours and the influence of her peers in a different light, and made the decision that if she was going to change her life, she needed to break ties with them and focus on her education:

> *I would have been nearly 17 and that's when I was like "I'm growing up, I'm nearly 17, I have to sort my crap out, deleted all my contacts, stopped being mates with [peer] because she was a big influence with what I was doing as well..like with drinking and drugs and running away. I'd only run away because she would want to do something so we'd run away together. Sounds really stupid now. So just decided to stop contact with everyone and so I was just going to [educational programme] and back home every day, just do my [study], come home…*

Renee was supported to make these changes through her connection with social services, which referred her to the education programme, and she also received support from her family/whānau. In the next narrative, Grace discusses the role her peers played in influencing

her bad behaviour, reflecting on how this contributed to what went wrong for her in mainstream school, and why this 'wake-up call' influenced her subsequent choices concerning who she became friends with:

Grace: *At [a high school] I did hang out with the wrong people, at times that didn't help me, they just wanted to see me get in trouble and I realise that now…*

Interviewer: and your best friend now has she been a big support to you?

Grace: *Yeah she is. She's really, she's always been there, she's real supportive…. Yeah she rings me up all the time: "Hello how are you my sister" she just, just the way she is, she's got a bubbly personality but she's had a lot of hard stuff in her life too but she doesn't let things get her down like now she's my idol.*

As Mel, Renee and Grace's narratives highlight, as young people age they often start to recognise the negative consequences of their behaviours. Grace's 'wake-up call' involved understanding that her peer group reinforced her bad behaviour. Choosing to break away from this group also influenced her later decisions to associate with peers who cared about her wellbeing, and wanted to see her do well. Mel, Renee and Grace's narratives reveal that after periods of school disengagement and being involved in harmful peer relationships, young people will often choose to re-engage with education, cease offending, connect with more positive peers and make changes to their lifestyle (Haigh, 2007; Urry et al., 2014). The literature suggests that this is partly due to the threat of entering the adult

justice system at age 18 (Haigh, 2007; Stevens et al., 2013; Urry et al., 2014) as well as other social factors, such as the desire to participate with positive peers, improve relationships with their family/whānau, and find a meaningful place as adults in their community. Many young people in the study described 'wake-up calls' when they were 16 and 17 which involved their desire to cease their troubling behaviours, re-engage with their education, and associate with new peers who supported positive changes in their lives. Service involvement at these points was critical as practitioners could provide the resources and emotional support that facilitated these major changes in direction.

TURNING POINT: OFFENDING

Entry into offending was a common turning point for the vulnerable young people in this study. Young people's involvement with youth justice services was often precipitated by another key turning point, disengaging from education. The next narratives highlight how educational disengagement was a factor that influenced young people's turning point into offending:

Ryan:

Interviewer: So apart from wagging, you were getting into trouble with the police. What was the trouble you were getting into?

Ryan: Fighting, graffiti, and just dumb stuff. I realised it's a waste of time.

Becks:

I got kicked out of 4th form at high school and …I then I was to

be honest I was kind of in trouble with the cops and stuff

Ryan and Becks both became involved in offending when they disengaged from school. Ryan became involved in a youth justice process (community service) to address his low level offending, while Beck's low level offending resulted in social service involvement as her offending was attributed to stressors in her caregiver relationship. Many young people have contact with the police or justice system at some point during their teenage years. The Ministry of Social Development notes that "while about 30 per cent of young people are apprehended by the Police at least once, only 1 per cent of all young people become chronic offenders" (MSD, 2009). Similarly, the Ministry of Justice reports that the majority of offending by young people is minor and short term; nearly half of all known offences committed by young people are considered to be of minimum seriousness (Ministry of Justice, 2009; 2010; Stevens et al., 2013). Both Ryan and Becks desisted from offending and re- connected with their education while involved with services.

Many young people who offended had also experienced challenges in their family/whānau. In the next narrative, Piri, who had life-long exposure to abuse within his family/whānau, started offending while disengaged from school. He became involved with older, offending peers during this time. This turning point provided him with an identity as a skilled offender:

> *Taking everything in their houses, robbing people on the streets and stuff for money-yeah all of it for money. And that was when I think it was when I was 13… and then um 14 it was the same and then 15 I was recruited into the [gang] Um coz um to get into that gang you have to show them what you are capable of and um they already, by the time I was 12 to 15 they already heard of my rap; robbing people, taking cars and all of that so*

I was recruited straight away and um I started all of that and it was just the same thing and then I got into selling drugs.

Mel discusses her turning point into offending:

I started [a high school] and I started kind of getting picked-on coz I was like quite brainy and I was real good at school so I just stopped, I stopped being good. I started stealing and taking drugs to school and selling them at school. And I just started being real naughty…the police they just know that whenever something gets stolen, that I had something to do with it I did it…But now they know now that I have cut down hard-out. I don't do it anymore I just.

Interviewer: So why's that, what's changed?

Mel: Because I went to a [youth justice residence]…I had no contact with anyone..then I had to go and do [youth justice residential programme] and that's just another life-changing experience altogether. That's the hardest thing but the bestest thing you can ever do in your life.

Piri's and Mel's stories touch on the complex reasons why young people from adverse backgrounds may offend. Piri's turning point into gangs and offending, despite youth justice involvement, continued throughout his adolescent years and he expressed that he was 'probably going to prison'. In contrast, Mel's later entry into the youth justice system helped her change her challenging behaviours. The next section discusses the role that youth justice services played in helping young people change their offending behaviour by supporting positive turning points.

Youth justice residences and rangitahi youth programmes

Placement within a youth justice residence represented a positive turning point for many of the young people in this study. In addition to taking them out of difficult environments and providing structure, activities and routine, residences offered many programmes that addressed unmet educational needs, drug and alcohol use, and anger issues. Young people said that residential placements gave them the space to exit poor peer relationships, 'detox' from heavy drug and alcohol use, and achieve in ways that they had never considered possible. Young people often described the relationships with practitioners while in these settings as positive, and for some, these relationships facilitated their desire to make big changes in their lives; these were often changes that they had been trying to make by themselves without support. As Jodi explains:

> *It was actually a bit of a detox. And it gave me what I needed like that was the best thing I've done in my life. It gave me what I needed to think about in my life and understand that this is where I will end up if I keep going the way I'm going. And that the reason I was doing that was coz I was angry at the other people. And really they, they would eventually fuck my life up for me. So I just needed to let that go. If I wanted to go any further in the right direction pretty much and that's like yea I have never ever regretted my choice to go to residence.*

What is interesting here is that Jodi attributes going into a youth justice residence as her choice, however, other aspects of her interview reveal that this was a result of her prolonged offending and her caregiver's inability to support her to desist from this behaviour. What is important here is that Jodi attributes this turning point as agentic; Jodi wanted to make these positive changes and in her interview she had constructed this as a choice she had made. For

Rangi, attending a rangitahi youth programme for six months and forming a relationship with a police officer while there, re-connected him with the activities and adult guidance that he had lost when his stepfather died:

> *But there is like [rangitahi youth justice programme], that organisation helped heaps. Like if I never went there til this day I still wouldn't have my license. That's the main changing point in my life…the thing with Juvie residences is that in my eyes as I see it, is they're just putting you in there with more criminals and then when you come out you come back out as a better one.. We weren't locked up, we weren't with crims but since we weren't in the den, the cave [lock up], with cages around us all the boys got different ways to show their talents, coz in Juvie it's a lot harder to for all the boys to show their talents… At the [rangitahi youth justice programme], you've all got your separate talents, which you're good at. Like if you're a good diver, you do diving, hunting. You do heaps there. It's a residential placement for 6 months. You got to be on supervision order and you got to go there by the courts. But it's the best thing that's ever happened to me.*

Like Rangi, Kui found that her experiences in a youth justice residence provided her with the opportunity to focus on developing her skills and positive attributes, and resolve some of her unmet educational needs:

> *Because like, even though I loved [youth justice residence], and I really, really want to go back there, but I don't want to go back there for a bad reason. I don't want to go back there because I'm in trouble. I did like it. I did like a whole heap of art and carving, and heaps of sports…and I loved the school 'cause like my problem was when I was at school I didn't really, like I had to*

be told more than once. Like I needed more one on one with the teacher, and she couldn't, or they couldn't, do that because they were in a classroom of 30 kids, you know? And you can't just pay as much attention to that one kid. And so that was also my problem at school…[in residence] I like did stuff that I never even knew, and stuff that I should have learnt ages ago, and stuff like that, it was really good.

As Rangi and Kui highlight, residential placements afforded them distance from stressors (caregivers, peers) and provided structure, routine and skill development. These were critical factors that facilitated positive change. While in residence Kui was able to start working on improving the areas of her life, such as education, which had contributed to her involvement with offending (Dewhurst et al., 2014a). These young people were able to participate in youth-focused programmes that specifically addressed their particular needs; they had opportunities to address the causes of their offending, their unmet educational needs, drug and alcohol issues, and could build life skills.

Many young people in this study described residential placements as a positive turning point, but expressed apprehension that they would not be able to maintain these changes once they exited these programmes. This was largely due to the influence of their peers and not having access to wider social networks that could continue to support and foster the positive changes they had made while in residence.

Young people's 'wake-up calls' regarding their offending

Young people's narratives of offending and 'wake-up calls' involved re-appraisal of their behaviour which in turn, influenced a subsequent turning point. Haigh (2009) describes desistance from

crime as a process; as a progressive move away from criminal activity. This interpretation highlights that turning points and changes are required on many levels for a young person to cease offending. The initial decision to stop offending requires particular forms of support and, critically, to maintain this decision over time, timely access to appropriate forms of support and assistance is required. As Jodi highlights:

> *Yup that cop told me, I want to remand you till you're 17 so we can lock you up for 12 years. That's what he said to me. And he had a smile on his face the whole time and I know he was dead serious. So yea that changed me. A bit that woke me up that I'll, you know if I was, if I was 17 I would have gone away for 12 years. And that you know, sitting in YJ for three months going 'fuck I don't want to be here', thinking to myself I could be, I could have been in somewhere way worse for a longer period of time. So yea that conversation was one that will always stick in my head. Yea that conversation.*

For Jodi, her 'wake-up call' was facilitated by several external factors; the concerned feedback from a police officer about where her offending behaviour could take her and her entry into a youth justice residence. These experiences were salient for Jodi; while in residence she reflected on where she was going in her life and that there was a very real possibility that if her behaviours did not change, she would find herself in much more serious circumstances with the justice system. Jodi's 'wake-up call' indicates that she had reached a critical moment, a crossroads in her life; to continue her offending behaviours or to stop. This 'wake-up call' was life changing for Jodi, she utilised the resources, external (youth justice, support from practitioners) and internal (reflection, desire to change) and the direction she chose was to cease offending and re-engage with education.

A few young people's 'wake-up calls' involved empathetic processes; by putting themselves in the shoes of those they harmed, they were able to recognise the impact their behaviours had on others. In the next narrative, Kui, who had been involved with youth justice services for a sustained amount of time for multiple car thefts, and had gone through a Family Group Conference (FGC), had a 'wake-up call' when she was placed in a youth justice residence. Her 'wake-up call' involved the realisation that her offending was hurting others:

> *Because I'd had enough, and you know, like I realised what, I finally clicked on what I was doing was like wrong, and how, and all the people that I've affected, and me doing this, and stuff like that, and…. like you know, people went without cars for days, weeks, maybe even months, and you know, I didn't think of stuff like what if someone, like if someone's like really hurt, and you know, they need to get somewhere, to go see them and they can't because I've left them without a car? And like I think, imagine if I was in that situation, if I had a car, and my little sister got ran over or something, how would I get to her, to get to see her and stuff like that. It made me really realise that yeah, it's not good, and I don't want to do it anymore.*

Lena, the young person in the next narrative, went through a similar 'wake-up call' as that experienced by Kui. Lena had been through an FGC process to address shoplifting and theft. Through empathising with one of the targets of her past offending, Lena recognised how harmful her offending behaviour was:

> *We stole someone's phone and I was like going through the text messages and I read a text message from their kid and it was like: I love you mum. And I was like: whoa what if some person stole my dad's phone and read text messages from me…And so then I like felt like, yeah, I know how they would feel. I stopped*

doing it eh.

Kui and Lena's 'wake-up calls' take account of the impact their actions had on others. Their moral reasoning has a relational dimension, that is, they can imagine the impact their behaviour could not only have on the victims of their offending, but the victims' significant others (Healy, 2010; Sapouna et al., 2011).

For these young people, their harmful behaviours had precipitated their involvement with youth justice services. For Kui and Lena, their 'wake-up calls' involved the realisation that they could no longer offend due to the harm they could cause others. Kui and Lena's 'wake-up calls' were an opportunity to use their new knowledge to make better decisions, engage with support, and change their behaviour (Thomson et al., 2002). Furthermore, what is apparent from these young people's narratives is that 'wake-up calls' are not only within the control of an individual but can also arise from the intervention of events beyond an individual's control (e.g. caregiver decisions, entry into youth justice residence/programme). Although the 'wake-up calls' in these young people's lives were associated with agentic processes, their ability to negotiate these events into turning points was also structured, as they often had support from their family/whānau and practitioners at these times. In their narratives it is evident that changing their behaviour depended not only on relational and internal dimensions, but on the resources and support they were able to draw on in different socio-cultural and service contexts.

TURNING POINT: THE ROLE OF PRACTITIONERS IN TURNING POINTS

In this study, it became clear that practitioners played important roles in young people's turning points and 'wake-up calls', supporting the

evidence that if young people who face multiple adversities have a positive experience in one area of their life this can make a significant difference by encouraging them to develop strategies to address their challenges in other areas (Stevens et al., 2014a; Ungar et al., 2012). A single experience or episode can be a positive turning point. For instance, a relationship (even if short lived) with a foster parent, practitioner or teacher, who can orient themselves towards the potential turning points can have in facilitating positive change. Complexity thinking emphasises that even a small change in a young person's experience can have a ripple effect and trigger a series of changes (Gilligan, 2000; Sanders et al., 2012). Social services are in a unique position to activate this ripple effect, by providing practical resources such as access to accommodation, funding, and food, as well as emotional and relational resources, such as counselling, support and advocacy (Dewhurst et al. 2014b). The analysis of young people's narratives about turning points, indicated quite clearly that school counsellors, mental health, justice and social service practitioners had a central role during key turning points in young people's education, mental health management, offending, and changes in living circumstances.

Counsellors

A few young people discussed the supportive role counsellors had played during turning points. In the following narrative, Mark, who had been bullied and often did not attend school because of health issues, including depression, discusses the role his school counsellor played during a major turning point in his educational pathway:

> *I just stopped going. I got bored of everyone teasing me. And then the counsellor, told me about [the Activity Centre] and told me basically I had to go, so I just went. Someone from the school started approaching my Mum about it, and she just said*

it sounded like a good idea. So I just went. It was just the counsellor that was helpful. Nobody else really cared. The school was just happy about me going I guess, and trying to get me to fill out a form for me to leave the school completely. They weren't in touch with my family. They told my Mum I wasn't going to school and that was about it. That's all they tried to do….I'd been seeing the counsellor because I was suffering from depression prior to that.

As Mark's narrative highlights, when young people fall behind educationally and become disruptive in class, a downward spiral is activated, wherein the conflict with teaching professionals influences further disengagement (Dewhurst et al., 2014a). Young people in this situation are frequently propelled into seeing school counsellors on the recommendation of teachers. Counsellors are in a unique position, of not only being able to directly support a young person, but in potentially resolving teaching professionals' concerns around the young person's disengagement (Baker et al., 2009). Mark's narrative reveals that his relationships with school professionals were not positive, he felt as though they did not really care, or wanted to help him with the issues he was experiencing at school. In response to these feelings, Mark truanted from school. However, he made a positive connection with his school counsellor who helped him deal with depression. This practitioner became pivotal in converting the negative turning point, of avoiding going to school, into a positive turning point that re-connected him to education.

Although Mark expressed value in having his school counsellor's support at this turning point, there is also a subtext in his narrative. Mark potentially would have liked to have his issues formally addressed by the school, as Mark says, his school were "happy about me going". This suggests when it seems that a young person can no longer manage mainstream school that this is an opportunity for

practitioners to ask the young person if there is a way that their issues could be resolved so that they stay at their current school. Even if resolving the issues is not possible, this sends an important message to the young person, that their place in the school community is important.

In the next narrative, Jayden, who had been involved with services when he was younger for behavioural issues at school, and had been in a youth justice residential treatment programme for assault, discusses a positive turning point in his behaviour and how he learned to cope with his stressors as a result of his relationship with a counsellor:

Jayden: *Yeah saw this guy [a counsellor]…He helped me figure out how to deal with my anger, and what really pushes me, in certain ways that make me smash and makes me angry, made me see that it's better to walk away than to confront people, that it's just a waste of time getting in trouble all the time.*

Interviewer: And how come that, in previous times people have said that, but you haven't listened, what made him make you listen to what he was saying?

Jayden: *Oh I think, 'cause I liked him, he was just a good counsellor, he did lots of listening, didn't do a lot of talking like the other ones do. And I don't know, it wasn't just what we did, it was other things as well, when we got into it, it made me realise it was more of, that I was in the wrong for doing what I did, and it just doesn't need to happen.*

Jayden's experience highlights that being able to build a trusting relationship with a practitioner plays a vital role in facilitating turning points (Sanders et al., 2012). In Jayden's situation this turning point resulted in positive changes in his behaviour. He recognised that his offending was connected to his anger that he was in the wrong when he was violent towards others and that 'this does not need to happen'. Jayden learned to respond to heightened emotional states and difficult situations by walking away and over time he was able to connect with peers who were not involved in violent behaviour.

Mental health services

A few young people experienced turning points as a result of their relationship with mental health practitioners. As Kelly and then Jodi discuss:

> *She just gave me like ways to help me, she gave this little book, it was a pretty little book, she said "look when you are feeling depressed and want to cut yourself, write what's happened and why you want to cut yourself and put in a reason how you can stop doing it". And that's how it was stopping me.*

Jodi:

> *When I was in [youth justice residence] I asked them to put me onto some meds which I had discussed with the [child mental health service] people that came up and seen me in [city]. But that caused a bit of drama with my family because none of them supported that and didn't support my decision or anything. Oh that kinda cut back my relationship with a lot of my family. Especially my nana. There were my mother's parents that were the only ones really supporting me… She didn't like that I was on the meds and she just thought I was lying, attention seeking and all that.*

Although Kelly and Jodi's relationships and treatment pathways with the mental health system appear quite different, they both revolve around practitioners positively responding to the young person's needs, requests for support, and assisting them to better manage their issues. Both of these young people experienced positive turning points in how they coped with their mental health issues. For Kelly, the coping mechanism shown to her by the practitioner, encouraged her to develop self-efficacy and agency in managing her self-harm. For Jodi, having her request for medication granted, provided her with the validation she sought concerning her long term struggles with mental health issues; validation that she was not receiving from her family/whānau. Practitioners are in a unique position to respond to the challenges young people have, especially when family/whānau systems, due to their own complex challenges and lack of support, may be unable to respond to the unique needs of the young person (Dewhurst et al., 2014b; Sanders et al., 2014; Ungar, 2012).

Social service practitioners

A large number of young people described the involvement of social service practitioners during important turning points. The involvement of these services frequently coincided with serious issues within the family/whānau environment, such as family/whānau violence, abuse and neglect, as well as the challenging behaviours of the young person. The young people's narratives describe being moved into new care arrangements (foster, family/whānau placements) when they were children and then sometimes into family/whānau therapy and care and protection residences (usually as a result of their challenging behaviours). Young people who started offending described the involvement of practitioners in youth justice interventions. These interventions were aimed at resolving the issues that exacerbated their offending and this service involvement often resulted in changes in young people's living

environments (i.e. family/whānau placement, foster care). The young people's narratives reveal how these changes impacted on them and how social service practitioners engaged and worked with them during these turning points. Tina, due to neglect and family/whānau violence, had been involved with social services in some capacity for most of her life. She describes her childhood as being marked by regular and terrifying physical assaults from her father and that other family members did not intervene to stop this. Tina discusses the role social services played during a key turning point in her challenging childhood:

Tina: *I could trust my social worker.*

Interviewer: Ok, ok. What kind of things did you feel able to tell her.

Tina: *What dad was always doing to me and mum and the rest of my family...I phoned [social service] once, and I went and asked for my social worker. And told her that dad was giving me a bash and then she said she'd come over. She told me if she sees dad over here then she's gunna take all of us away from mum. And then dad hadn't come out but then she found out that dad was coming over from the neighbours, and then I got taken away from mum.*

For Tina, this incident was the first time she had voluntarily been in contact with social services and this resulted in a significant turning point; she was removed from her parents and placed with other family/whānau members. Tina's social worker had expressed to her during prior investigations into family/whānau violence that parents hitting and hurting is wrong, and to contact child welfare

services if this happened again. This conversation subsequently became very important for Tina. On the day she contacted the social worker, Tina described feeling as though this time her father was going to kill her, and that she had to get away. When the social worker talked with Tina and offered her support, this indicated that they cared about what was going on for her. This gave Tina someone outside of the family/whānau she could reach out to, who knew what was going on and could take action.

Involvement with social service agencies could function as turning points for young people. This was particularly the case when involvement endured over time, extending into adolescence (Stevens et al., 2014a). In the next narrative, Sue, who had been involved with services since she was seven, describes leaving her family/whānau and entering a care and protection residence as a positive turning point in her life. Sue's narrative highlights how the support from services can create positive turning points:

Sue: *I think that was a turning point, being away from home and they taught me a lot of stuff…I went to [care and protection residence] and I stayed there for almost 2 years. It was a lot of fun there. Yeah that changed that really helped me change my life. Ah coz I, they gave me structure and I, I wasn't really used to structure and I had like rules and they helped me stick to my goals, they helped me stay in College for over a year. I'm still at College now which has been like 3 years like staying at a school..*

Interviewer: Who helped you?

Sue: *I think myself and my social worker. I stopped offending since last, since I went to care and*

protection. I found out it's you know, a lot easier now…. Ah I used up everything they had like I used up all the tools they gave me, they offered me, not like working tools like…

Interviewer: strategies?

Sue: Yeah.

For Sue, the involvement of services at crucial turning points provided her with access to resources that were not readily available in her family/whānau. Sue discussed experiencing parental rejection; they had been unable to care for her as a baby and she was brought up in multiple family/whānau homes. She described her childhood as transient, she was often exposed to drug and alcohol abuse and social services had been involved in her life since she was very young. She regarded her service involvement as particularly positive, and the support she received from practitioners assisted her to access and utilise her talents and skills, and to attain some of her goals. These practitioners played a key role in numerous positive turning points throughout her life. Although, ideally family and whānau play this central role in supporting and caring for young people, social service practitioners can often take on these sorts of caring roles, providing support and resources for the young person at key points.

Several young people discussed important and positive turning points in their relationships with their central caregivers as a result of their involvement with service practitioners. In the next narratives, John and Alofa discuss how social services provided support for the family/whānau as well as the young person. John explains how his caregiver relationships were influenced by service involvement:

Ah, like mum sort of feels that she is not the only one trying.

Like yeah she isn't the only one trying with me and she even tells me that. She goes look there is obviously other people out there that care. Because they are trying to help you, so help yourself. Pretty much. I think she felt quite good being supported by [service]. She felt that she was supported as well. Like she wasn't just giving everything to me, like supporting me and not getting anything back.

Alofa describes the changes in their relationship as a result of her parents attending counselling when she was 14:

It's a massive change. My parents went through the [service] things, ah counselling. They went to counselling with [service] and I was just like 'wow, mum you've changed' and like now I can actually talk to her about stuff and I'm happy now. It's brought us closer, like we probably were just falling apart. It was just like me and mum didn't know each other, but now it's just like bringing us together

For John and Alofa, their parent's willingness to engage with services represented positive turning points, because it resulted in improved familial relationships leading to improvement in the young person's behaviour. Significant adults have a critical role to play in fostering positive change in young people's lives, particularly when these young people are exposed to high levels of risk. Research has demonstrated that parents who are able to provide high levels of emotional and practical support report greater parenting consistency over time when compared to disadvantaged parents without support (Marra et al., 2009). There can be a multitude of reasons as to why young people and their family/whānau do not access or utilise social service support (Dewhurst et al., 2014b). These can include having negative experiences with practitioners and feelings of shame around accessing support, both of which can result in caregivers not being

willing to support the young person's desire to seek help.

Ungar et al., (2012) explored the impact of engaged triangulated relationships between practitioners, caregivers and young people and found that support from practitioners can have a positive influence on relationships between young people and their caregivers. Young people were more likely to make positive changes when their caregivers actively participated in the therapeutic/intervention process (Ungar et al., 2012). John and Alofa's narratives reveal the influence of an engaged triangulated process between the social service the family/whānau and the young person and the contribution this made to overcoming challenges in the family/whānau. Both of their caregivers regularly attended therapeutic sessions and meetings involving the young people. The support the young people and their caregivers experienced had a ripple effect on relieving some of the relational stressors they had been experiencing and provided the support the young people needed to change their harmful behaviours.

TURNING POINT: RELATIONSHIPS

This section explores turning points in young people's relationships. Young people who face multiple adversities experience a wide range of turning points in their key relationships. For example the death of a family/whānau member, the birth of a sibling, changes in caregivers' living circumstances, the onset of abuse from caregivers and family/whānau, removal from family/whānau, and being placed in care can all constitute turning points. Many young people discussed changes in their caregiver relationships as stressful turning points, and others, framed these experiences as setting in motion a range of processes that influenced positive change.

Changes in caregiver circumstances

In this study, young people pinpointed changes in caregiver and family/whānau dynamics as key turning points (see also Dewhurst et al., 2014c). Young people rely on their family/whānau in a multitude of ways, to meet their physical needs, such as shelter, and to meet their emotional and relational needs, such as support, acceptance and a sense of belonging (Sanders et al., 2012). However, for some of the young people in the study, the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by their families/whānau hindered their capacity to respond to these young people's physical and emotional/relational needs. Family/whānau who faced multiple challenges, such as family violence, drug and alcohol misuse, mental illness, and financial hardship, were constrained in their capacity to positively respond to the young person's needs. This section explores the narratives that highlight how changes in caregiver circumstances can become significant turning points for young people.

Relationships with caregivers were often cited as turning points in the young person's lives and were associated with significant change, such as changes in their physical environment, including moving house and cities, changes in household composition, such as the arrival of a new sibling or step parent, and disruption in schooling. A majority of the young people discussed changes in their home environments and caregiver relationships as conflicted turning points in their childhood and adolescence. As Moana discusses:

> *Then [caregiver's new partner] came to live with us. And he did heaps of stuff too. He was my aunt's husband. ..She went to [another city] and met him; she had only known him for a week and got pregnant to him. She said, sweet he can come and live with us. So he moved down in about February. And lived with us for about 4 or 5 months. I was 12 at the time when he starting*

touching me and stuff. It just ended up a real weird situation. Horrible, sad, depressing everything. I started drinking, starting smoking pot, starting smoking cigarettes things like that. For myself to feel better you know it was for myself a lifesaver for me just something to take my mind off it.

Jasmine also highlights how the entry of another adult into the household became a challenging turning point:

(Things started to go downhill) about thirteen. Oh I was probably about twelve actually and the big thing that points out at me, thinking about it, is when my mother got with her partner that had just gotten out of prison. Mum broke up with my father to be with him. And she ended up having my brother to him [partner] and [the partner] ended up leaving our life for the majority of time. And then out of the blue one day he [partner] came and lived with us again and that's when I started to self-harm. That's when I really started going down – like I didn't really start going downhill but that's when it probably changed for the worst. And then he [partner] left and went back to prison.

For Moana and Jasmine, the introduction of a caregiver's partner into their household marked a turning point, not only in their level of individual safety, but in their behaviour, mental health, and relationship with their caregivers. Moana attributes the introduction of her aunt's new partner, and the subsequent abuse she experienced by him, as the central reason why she started using alcohol and drugs as a way to cope with what she was experiencing. Jasmine identified that she started going downhill and self-harming when her mother's partner moved in, saying that it was 'out of the blue' which suggests that Jasmine felt like she had no agency in the decision. Jasmine had experienced abuse at the hands of this partner in the past, abuse that

was not validated by her mother. The return of this partner into her home environment triggered this past trauma and exposed her to the possibility that this might occur again.

These turning points were significant for Moana and Jasmine, and resulted in harmful consequences. The level of involvement of social services at the time of these turning points is not clear in the young people's narratives. The man who abused Moana was being investigated by the police at the time of her interview, and Jasmine went on to disengage from school, run away from home and enter care at the age of 14. These dramatic changes in the young people's behaviour point to challenging turning points caused by their caregiver relationships.

In the next young person's narrative, a potentially negative turning point is 'turned on its head' due to a range of protective factors. Ellie had moved back in with her mother at age 13, after being brought up by her Nan. She experienced this change in caregivers as a difficult turning point. She started running away from her mother's house, truanting from school and using drugs and alcohol frequently. Due to her truanting, Ellie was connected with her school counsellor:

> *When I was in [name of town], my Mum used to give me the bash, 'cos I was in my first year of starting at [college], which was at the end of the year and I was living with my Mum and I didn't like it. And I'd go to the Counsellor in [school] and I'd tell her all my problems and then she would talk to [social service] and blah, blah, blah. That's how I ended up back at my Nan's, through [social service]. 'Cos sometimes I just felt like running away, and every time I ran away I got a hiding when I got back…. we had a family meeting and they [mum and Nan]were just going at it and going at it and going at it. And then my Nan goes to me "where do you want to go?" and I was like "I wanna*

go home, 'cos I know this ain't my home". Because I haven't been living with her my Mum my whole life. And my Nan just started crying and she was like "good, because I want you to come home". So I was like "sweet as, I'm going back home".

This turning point in caregiver relationships for Ellie, coupled with the transition into a new high school, contributed to changes in her behaviour. Many young people in the study experienced changes in caregivers as challenging, their harmful behaviours often escalated due to the dynamics created by; the entry of a new person in the household, a change of caregiver, different rules and boundaries in the household and by losing close ties with their previous caregiver (Stevens et al., 2014; Urry et al., 2014). However, for Ellie, her connection with her school counsellor was a protective factor that supported her to manage the changes in her caregiver relationships and her transition to a new school. The school counsellor played a key role in changing a negative turning point, into a positive one. The social service Ellie and her family were connected with, organised a family/whānau meeting, which helped facilitate Ellie's move back to her Nan. Ellie went on to re-engage with school, and experienced a positive change in her outlook by being able to continue living with the person she had the strongest attachment to.

In the next narrative, Trent describes the discovery of abuse in the family/whānau as a difficult turning point, highlighting the ongoing impact that abuse can have on young people and their family/whānau:

We had a big court case about it cos the charges were about me and [siblings] being sexually abused by him [father]… he got six months for [sibling] and two years for lying to the court… After that Mum got quite bad depression and anxiety. She got quite unwell. I was pretty much looking after her and me since a

young age…. I had quite a lot of time off school…when you have that much time off at school by the time you go back to school it's like an alien concept, so I didn't really fit in, started acting out a bit.

When Trent was seven, the removal of the perpetrator from his environment, while a positive turning point concerning the cessation of the abuse, did not fully address the ongoing issues within his family/whānau (Stevens et al., 2014a). Abuse has the potential to traumatise the entire family/whānau system, compromising the family's/whānau's wellbeing (e.g. mental health) and significantly altering the relationships in the family/whānau. Caregivers have been found to experience high levels of emotional distress, poorer family/whānau functioning, and lower satisfaction in their parenting role after revelations of abuse (Manion et al., 1996).

Trent's narrative reveals the complex stressors and challenges that abuse often has on a family/whānau. Due to his mother's poor mental health Trent became her caregiver at a young age and this marked a turning point not only in his educational engagement, but in his identity and sense of place within his community (see also Dewhurst et al., 2014c). Parentification is the assumption of caregiving roles by children which may, on one hand, foster competency and autonomy, but in the long term, can compromise and interfere with their own normal developmental processes and result in their needs as children not being met (Barnett & Parker, 1998; Burnett et al., 2006). Parentification may hinder 'normal' childhood development, as the accelerated transition into a caregiving role places expectations on the child that are developmentally inappropriate. Furthermore, almost by definition children and young people are not often adequately supported to fulfil these roles (Barnett & Parker, 1998; Burnett et al., 2006; Cunningham et al., 2013).

Trent cared for his mother for an extended period of time without additional support. He had looked after his mother since he was seven, and by the time he was 15, he was experiencing mental health issues of his own, along with a range of educational and social challenges. Trent's absence from school was an indication that something was going on for him, but it seemed that neither the school nor other service providers in his community investigated his absences. As Trent points out, school became an 'alien' place where he could no longer 'fit in'.

Moana, Jasmine, Ellie and Trent's narratives reinforce what we know about young people who experience adverse turning points in their family/whānau and caregiver relationships. These young people need recognition and appropriate support when navigating transitions. Family/whānau and educational professionals are often some of the first people to notice behaviour changes and are therefore in a valuable position to respond appropriately. Furthermore, service practitioner's connections with school professionals (highlighted in Ellie's narrative) can assist young people and their family/whānau to access appropriate support. Importantly, acknowledging that young people are experiencing a challenging turning point has the potential to help them respond more positively to these challenges reducing the likelihood that they may engage in harmful behaviours as a coping strategy (Bowen & Richman, 2002).

Bereavement

The loss of a significant other through death was a powerful turning point for some of the young people in this study. While it is possible to positively respond to bereavement this type of loss can prove to be a challenging experience for young people particularly when they have relatively few positive emotional and relational resources in

their lives. Bereavement can reinforce a vulnerable young person's sense of powerlessness over his or her life. The way a young person manages this is often dependent on what resources are available to support them work through their grief. The way practitioners support young people through such powerful emotional experiences can also influence whether bereavement becomes a negative or positive turning point.

In the following narratives, Sean and Kui discuss bereavement as a key turning point. Both of these young people had experienced a great deal of adversity over their lives; Sean's relationship with his family/whānau had influenced his early involvement with drugs and alcohol and at the time of the bereavement he was struggling to engage with a drug and alcohol treatment programme. Kui had been involved with a partner who committed suicide and had struggled with her own feelings of suicidality and self-harm for some time. Their experiences of bereavement highlight the interplay of individual and external resources available to them at this challenging time:

Sean

> *…did the whole funeral thing and um went to hang out with [family/ whānau] and they were all getting smashed eh. And there was [drugs/alcohol] in front of me and I stuck to [fizzy drink]. I felt so proud of myself afterwards eh…I looked inside myself and at [family/whānau] who were drunk. I was like: Can't you actually like relate this to his death?*

Kui describes the loss of her partner:

> *[Partner passed away] was in hospital in an induced coma on life support… his family wouldn't let me go see him because he was really sick and they were scared about my mental health - cos it did have a very big impact on me… And then my drinking*

got really worse, I started drinking all the time, smoking drugs all the time and I ended up trying to kill myself. Then they diagnosed me with depression… I was looked after for about two months by [practitioners].

Sean and Kui's experiences demonstrate that the response to an event is mediated by the presence or absence of support and this will influence young people's ability to cope with subsequent events. Kui and Sean expressed distress for their loss; however their individual responses to the deaths were different. Both struggled with drug and alcohol addiction but their response to their bereavement appears to have been mediated by individual factors at the time of the bereavement and the level of service involvement. Sean was already in a drug and alcohol programme and had spent some time away from his family/whānau and from regular use of drugs and alcohol. His realisation that he did not want to turn to drugs and alcohol as a way to cope with the crisis the bereavement represented for him reinforced his commitment to engage with the programme. The scaffolding and resources were already in place to support Sean with this decision, and in this way, the traumatic event of a relative's death became a pivotal and positive turning point for him.

Kui's way of coping with her partner's death was to turn to drugs and alcohol and as she became increasingly mentally unwell, mental health services became involved. Service engagement at this pivotal time facilitated her movement away from drugs and alcohol and towards improved mental health. As the narratives from Sean and Kui highlight, the bereavement of a significant other resulted in two very different turning points. Kui identified that her mental health was deteriorating around the time of her loss and this was not able to be mediated by access to, or recognition that she and her family/whānau may have needed additional support at this time. Furthermore, it may not have been a time when Kui and her family/whānau

would have accessed support, as they may not have recognised that they needed, or could access help. For Sean, the bereavement became the motivation to commit to the substance abuse treatment programme and he utilised the resources in this environment to work through his grief. Resources, support and the young people's response to these determine the nature of turning points and the young people's subsequent experiences.

Romantic Partners

Young people's romantic relationships have been viewed through many lenses, as transitory and trivial, as a reflection of their early attachment experiences, as a developmental process linked to biological changes at the onset of adolescence, and as key socialisation experiences that can influence self-definition and sense of place in the broader social environment (Collins, 2003). Vulnerable young people have been found to place more emphasis on their romantic partners, entering sexual relationships from an early age and facing a greater risk of early entry into parenthood than young people who do not confront high levels of risk (Ellis et al., 1999). This is thought to be due to vulnerable young people having unmet emotional needs within their caregiver relationships, poor attachment experiences, low parental monitoring and experiences of abuse and neglect in their family/whānau. Due to these factors, young people may seek comfort from romantic relationships at a younger age than young people from less adverse circumstances (Ellis et al., 1999).

For many young people, being in a romantic relationship is central to their sense of belonging, provides a sense of self-worth and can afford status in a peer group (Connolly et al., 1999). Furthermore, romantic relationships can also be viewed as transactional; peer networks support partnerships, and romantic relationships facilitate

connections with other peers (Collins, 2003). Changes in partners can reflect both positive and negative turning points. A new partner can provide access to a new peer group and different social experiences whereas the loss of a partner can reduce the social resources available to a young person. If a relationship becomes controlling, abusive and isolating, this can also reduce the social resources and support available to a young person.

In the narratives presented here it is apparent that young people's relationships are not trivial or transitory, and play an important role as turning points in the young person's life. In fact many young people reported significant turning points in their lives due to their romantic relationships. Tess's narrative reveals that her prior involvement with a drug and alcohol counselling service had helped her address her addiction issues; she then became involved with someone who also supported her determination to keep off drugs:

> *Then I started to get a job, and I met my boyfriend who I've been with a year now and he hates smoking weed, hates that sort of stuff. So also meeting him – he got me motivated to get a job and all that. When I got a job I cut down a lot more and I started to feel more awake and I did my job better. Being with him I stopped -considering he didn't like it. But I loved him and I want to stay with him. I did it for him too, but then at the same time I was doing it for someone, but I never realised how much I was doing it for myself. So I just noticed that. And it was "Wow, I feel a lot better in myself, I can do things. I'm not shitty, I'm not tired, I'm like I'm awake I can get up early, I'm not sleeping in until one or two like I used to. It's more of me noticing in myself, rather than anybody telling me. That's how I got off it. I felt it in myself. A lot better.*

Tess's involvement with services had played a role in helping her

address her drug and alcohol issues, which was an important turning point, yet she also notes that the ongoing support her partner provided kept her on track once outside of these services. In this way, involvement with services had provided some skills and techniques that helped Tess get started on her drug free journey and the subsequent choices Tess made reflected her desire to keep on this trajectory. Although Tess says that she initially kept off drugs because of the importance she placed on the relationship, she then goes on to recognise that she has ultimately made these positive changes due to her own efforts and importantly, for herself. Peer influence is a frequent reason that people turn back to drugs and alcohol. They may feel socially isolated because they are no longer engaged in the same activities as their peers, and without an alternative and supportive peer network who are also desisting they may turn back to their previous activities (Berzin, 2010; Sanders et al., 2014c). Some young people will resolve their issues despite peer influence, and many will change their lifestyle, cut themselves off from peers, without having an alternative peer network to turn to. However, for Tess, having access to a supportive peer was beneficial.

In the next example, Tony, who had been through a youth justice residential programme for his offending and was associating with other offending peers, was influenced by his partner, his 'best friend', to turn up to his course. The influence this relationship had on Tony, subsequently led to him engaging in the programme and desisting from offending:

> *Oh she [partner] just like keeps me out of trouble. Yeah. I probably would have been in way more trouble without her. If I hadn't of met her, I was on that road. Like when I was at [a course] I had just met her at the end of that. And there I was getting into hard shit and then when I met her I just turned up with her. Instead of going out and getting into trouble. Yeah. All*

of the bros need 'missuses'…it is like her being my best friend. Yeah. So I want to be with her.

Relational factors have been found to influence young people's desistance from harmful behaviours (Sapouna et al., 2011) and in this way to comprise potential turning points. As we can see with Tony, these factors influenced his turning point away from offending. The importance of maintaining this relationship was a key factor that influenced changes in his behaviour. The influence that peers and romantic partners have in fostering important turning points is significant, and while it may be ideal that young people desist from harmful behaviours due to their own internal processes, it is also important to recognise that young people may access and utilise these internal resources through relating, and having positive relationships with others.

In the next narrative, Annette, who had experienced multiple challenges in her childhood, struggled with her drug and alcohol use and had been in turbulent relationships with other vulnerable young people, discusses how her internal processes influenced a turning point in her romantic partnerships:

Interviewer: And so you're in a relationship now?

Annette: Yes

Interviewer: Is he a different guy to what your ex was like?

Annette: Totally different, he's never touched drugs in his life, he drinks every so often, he's spiritual, he is a virgin and he's nineteen.

Interviewer: And so what drew you to him?

Annette: *I don't know - it's kind of like my doors opened up. Cos I used to shut guys like that out or if I tried to get in a relationship with them it just wouldn't work because subconsciously I'd push them away because of what I'd been through but – yeah…we talk things through.*

Annette recognised that due to her difficult life experiences, she would push 'guys like that' (i.e. not involved in troubling behaviour) away, subsequently choosing to be with partners who also had challenging behaviours. Annette recognised that her past experiences had influenced her relational choices, and her openness to becoming involved with someone who was not engaged in difficult behaviours, reflected a turning point in her life.

Tess, Tony and Annette's narratives reveal the positive influence romantic partners can have in facilitating change. Annette's story also touches on some of the factors (e.g. problematic caregiver relationships) that can influence vulnerable young people's choice in partners. In the next narrative, Kelly discusses a romantic relationship that had a negative impact on her wellbeing. Prior to this relationship she had been living in a care and protection family home for two years and was also being supported by mental health services for self-harm and suicide attempts. When Kelly discussed her life experiences, it was apparent that she had faced multiple adversities, and gone through several significant turning points, some very positive and others not so. Her narrative reveals a turning point into an abusive romantic relationship, which extended into abusive relationships with multiple members of his family/whānau:

I've been in a relationship recently with this dude and it was quite an abusive relationship…I moved to another city to live

with him and his family and then his mum she wrecked my job and I had a pretty depressive moment where he beat me up and so I cut myself and then the police got called in. I made an accusation…him and his mum denied it… Things just got worser... then we were living with his older sister, I looked after her daughter, I cleaned her house, if she was sitting on the couch, she's like go make baby a bottle, I would do it. I did everything for her.

Kelly had become socially isolated due to the controlling behaviour of her partner and his family/whānau. The move to another town to live with them, isolated her from her support network, family/whānau and friends, and due to Kelly's desire to belong and be loved she was vulnerable to the influence of not only this partner but also his family/whānau. Romantic relationships can connect young people with new networks, where they experience a sense of affirmation through belonging as well as acceptance. However as we can see from Kelly's experience, these new networks are not always positive, and though her desire to belong was strong, this left her vulnerable.

Attachment theory can help to explain why children who experience adversity find relationships challenging later in life (Bowlby, 1989; Frederick & Goddard, 2008). Attachment theory maintains that children's early experiences of relationships with their parents or caregivers, whether nurturing and reliable or unreliable and distant, inform their sense of self-worth and their ability to form positive, trusting relationships. There are indications that people who have experienced multiple adversities in their lives may be more vulnerable to abusive relationships; abuse is normalised due to experiences with caregivers who model that 'love' involves harm. However, not all individuals who experience abusive relationships have had lives marked by caregiver abuse. Low self-esteem (both partners) and gendered conventions around ownership and control of

romantic partners, can also be key factors (Barter, 2007). For Kelly, it appears as though some of these factors played a role.

Young people's romantic partnerships can be positive turning points but they can also constitute negative and challenging experiences for the young person. Paying attention to relational changes in young people's lives and acknowledging with genuine interest and regard the value and importance young people place in these relationships, is an important component of providing effective support. Young people's romantic relationships can reflect their present challenges; the young person's own vulnerabilities and determine significant turning points in young people's lives.

Entry into parenthood

A few young people discussed pregnancy and the birth of their first child as a turning point. The ensuing responsibility for another life influenced changes in their behaviour and for some, gave them access to a new identity. Maria, had been taking medication for a few years due to mood swings, and discussed how having a baby normalised her moods, and that this 'brought her back'. Sue describes how she was acting up before having the baby and lost friends partly in response to her acting out behaviours. Now these friends have reconnected with her:

> *Well, I just stopped being…well how I was when I got pregnant. As soon as I got pregnant I just stopped smoking, stopped drinking…yeah that's the only thing in my life that's helped. Well I had a baby inside me. A very good thing. If I didn't get pregnant I'd still be out drinking in the streets, getting arrested…I was getting arrested 3 or 4 times a week.*

Maria:

> *Coz now I'm normal like I'm not on anything. They're like the 'Maria's back' and I hang out with my brothers all the time, I go shopping with their girlfriends or wives. I feel uncomfortable having a baby at my age but like they've all been through it so they're really good like they understand it even though I'm young.*

Although pregnancy constituted a positive turning point for these two young women pregnancy, in itself, is not necessarily a positive turning point in the long term for young people. Indeed, early parenthood is often associated with multiple stressors and poor outcomes for both parents and children, usually due to the young age of the parents who often struggle to access stable incomes due to early exit from education (Corcoran et al., 2000). These narratives concern young people who were pregnant at the time of the interview, and thus pregnancy itself was a turning point in their lives, resulting in turning away from drugs and alcohol, offending, and acceptance into a new peer group. Pregnancy in itself does not guarantee the resolution of adversity; however it does give young people access to a potential identity turning point; entrance into the adult world of parenthood and potentially also access to new supportive resources.

'Wake-up calls' as turning points in young people's relationships

In several of the young people's narratives they identified 'wake-up calls' in their relationships as often profound insights into other people's influence on their behaviours. At times, these 'wake-up calls' involved painful understandings concerning family/whānau relationships. The realisations that the behaviours and values of key people in their lives caused, or put them at risk, influenced a range of subsequent behaviours that initiated change in the young people's lives. For example, following their 'wake-up calls' young people often

changed peer groups, moved into safer environments and sought support from family/whānau, educational professionals and social service practitioners. In the next narrative, Sean, who had been struggling with drug and alcohol abuse for several years, explains that his 'wake-up call' involved the realisation that his family/whānau was not in a position to support him address his issues:

> *It took me ten months because I was battling the programme that much for the first couple of months and then [my family/ whānau member died]… at one stage I found myself thinking like I've got family, or I've got my future, I can't have both coz my family suck they're just gonna get me on it [drugs and alcohol]… so I decided I'm not going to have a relationship with my family. I'm going to choose my future and that.*

Following this 'wake-up call' Sean engaged with a drug and alcohol treatment programme, where he re-connected with his education via correspondence, excelling in many subject areas. On exiting the treatment programme, Sean specifically asked his social service practitioner to help him re-enter mainstream school and provide him with supported accommodation, in a separate city from his family/ whānau. Sean's 'wake-up call' influenced a major turning point and the subsequent decisions he made concerning his life. These changes were influenced by the realisation that his family's/whānau's way of coping with challenges and stressors, was not how he wanted to cope, and his readiness to seek and engage with services provided him with the practical and emotional resources he required to carry through on these decisions.

In the next narrative, John describes a similar 'wake-up call' concerning the influence of his peer relationships on his behaviour. For some time John had been struggling with drug abuse, (he had quit and then started again) which was influenced by his association

with drug using peers. This resulted in a series of changes to his behaviour; including seeking out the support of an educational provider he had been connected with in the past:

> *Yeah I was like not this shit again. Yuk I don't want to wake up every morning and look at myself in the mirror and I am all sunken in. I changed my number and I never ever texted the [peers] ever again. Got out of that circle, stopped playing that game and just went back to course. My tutor was like what have you been up to, what's' happened, where's the rest of you? I just came back and went hard again, started doing good….And then just stayed off the drugs ever since. I just kept trying to get further and further through course.*

Vulnerable young people and their vulnerable peers often have relationships that mutually encourage and reinforce harmful behaviours (Urry et al., 2014). While the start and ending of peer relationships often signals a key turning point in young people's lives, 'wake-up calls' often precipitated the decision to exit peer relationships. Although John was vulnerable to drug addiction, his 'wake-up call' involved his realisation that his health was at risk. John's subsequent decisions and behaviour reflects this 'wake-up call'; he disconnected with his peer group and re-connected with a service that he had experienced in the past as helpful and positive.

In the following narrative, Mike, who was excluded from mainstream education due to his involvement with peers who used drugs at school, describes a 'wake-up call' concerning his behaviour with this peer group. Mike's narrative also highlights the influence that his alternative education provider had on creating opportunities for him to reflect on his challenging behaviours:

> *Interviewer: School's quite good now, eh. You've got good*

relationships

Mike: *Yeah, everything's pretty sweet. My behaviour's good. Trying to get up there in the sport, you know. When I get older I want to be a professional player. I can say "I went down the wrong road"...*

Interviewer: How did you get introduced to the drugs?

Mike: *Wrong people you hang out with. Wrong crowd… I don't do it anymore. I just look at them and I'm just like "what dicks"….Looking at myself, when I went to [alternative school] I was like "I'm ready to change". You have half an hour of thinking on stuff each day, a routine, and you'd just think about "why did you go down that road?" You feel real gutted.*

After a year in alternative education, Mike returned to mainstream school where he joined several sports teams and as a result of this, connected with a new peer group. His 'wake-up call' involved recognising the influence that the 'the wrong crowd' had had on his past behaviours. Mike's 'wake-up call' is reflected in how he reappraised drug use as negative, feeling 'gutted' with himself for being caught up in these behaviours and that he was 'ready to change'. Mike's narrative highlights how 'wake-up calls' that occur during these times have the capacity to influence positive changes in decision-making and behaviour.

During turning points in their relationships, these young people's 'wake-up calls' were a powerful foundation for supporting changes in their behaviour. By reaching the realisation that their current behaviours, peers, and outlook, were key influences in some of their

harmful choices, they were then able to make far-reaching positive changes. Each of these young people's 'wake-up calls' highlight that being able to make these important changes in their relationships was not only reliant on their internal process and willingness to change, but on being able to access, connect and count on adults and practitioners who could provide them with the resources they needed for their new 'journey'.

SUMMARY

When the young people in this study discussed turning points in their life course, it became increasingly clear that the lives of young people facing adversity were particularly vulnerable to negative consequences flowing from events that were beyond their control, such as complex family/whānau relationships, violence and abuse, disrupted attachments and family/whānau illness. Engagement in education was a major challenge for these young people. Their narratives reveal that the transition into high school, and their subsequent struggles to engage with and connect meaningfully with their education, reflected the challenges they were experiencing in elsewhere in their lives.

It is no surprise that year nine was a key turning point in their education journey. Entry into high school, a well-recognised and understood transition for most young people, is a particularly challenging time for vulnerable young people. For many young people in the study, the values, beliefs, and expectations of high school were discordant with their life experiences and circumstances, which was reflected in their struggles to find a sense of belonging. For the young people in this study navigating multiple adversities as well as the academic and social demands of high school became highly conflicted and the influence of other peers, who were also struggling, reinforced their reasons and rationales for disengaging from school.

Although not necessarily protective in the long term, this was a way they protected themselves against the additional distress of struggling academically and socially at school. For several young people, this turning point marked their entry into offending, connection with peers engaged in harmful behaviours, social isolation and for a few, mental health issues.

Usually, after a year or so (and in some cases within months of disengaging), many young people indicated that they wanted to re-engage with their education, despite their past challenges. These young people recognised that when they were in their first few years of high school, they were caught up with the behaviour of the group and were often struggling with other issues. Furthermore, many found their lifestyles outside of education, such as offending and using drugs and alcohol frequently, became less novel over time. The young people, who then decided to return to education, were showing self-awareness and self-regard. They no longer wanted to engage in risky behaviours. Their decisions to try to re-enter education was a positive turning point, fostering their self-worth, as well as connecting them with supportive people and service professionals. To be successful however, this decision needed to be backed up with supportive resources. For many of the young people in this study the decision to return to education involved enrolling at an alternative education programme, however, a few returned to mainstream school.

Young people's relationships with caregivers, social service professionals and peers played important roles at turning points, often facilitating and supporting change; for example, re-engaging with their education, desisting from offending, and maintaining drug and alcohol abstinence. Changes in young people's relationships were often key turning points, highlighting how young people can be influenced by caregivers' choices, changes in peer and family/whānau

relationships, romantic partnerships and social service and educational professional involvement.

Caregivers often influenced turning points for young people. For instance, geographical relocation often constituted a turning point as this usually involved changing schools and peers. Other key caregiver-influenced turning points included fluctuations in resources; new partners; the birth of siblings and the onset of mental health issues. Changes in their peer relationships often coincided with educational transitions, and also exerted a major influence during their turning points. Many young people's turning point narratives indicated that practitioner, caregiver, and peer relationships, including their own pregnancy and the advent of parenthood, played a significant role alongside their decisions to change; for example, to turn away, or turn to offending, drug and alcohol use.

How young people responded to turning points in their relationships also reflected their individual vulnerabilities and challenges in their environment. Young people, who had at least one, or a combination of positive caregiver, practitioner and peer relationship support during turning points identified these relationships as opportunities to keep on a positive trajectory. When relationships with peers and caregivers were less positive, their turning points involved the decision to turn away from these relationships. Frequently this occurred while they were in residential programmes and facilities.

It also became clear that some of the events captured within the concept of 'turning points' had more serious consequences than others, and similar events had a different impact on different people. Bereavement, for example, provided a turning point from which one young person took control of their life, and for another, threw them into a spiral of depression and despair, reinforcing a sense of

powerlessness, limiting and closing off possibilities. Young people's narratives that described relational turning points as detrimental were often marked by what appeared to be an absence of, or poor connections to support networks, and vulnerability connected to their caregivers' choices; for example, moving into a new area and starting a new school and the introduction of a new partner into the household. Often at these turning points, the young people described struggling at school, the influence of peers on their harmful and risky behaviours , deterioration in their mental health (e.g. the onset of self-harming behaviours) and drug and alcohol use.

As young people's lives progressed and new experiences influenced their awareness, other elements emerged as salient, and young people discussed 'wake-up calls', reflecting changes internal to the self. These might involve rethinking the self after a period of depression, educational disengagement, the impact of a break-up of a friendship or intimate relationship, or regret about offending. 'Wake-up calls' frequently coincided with an external experience and influence that contributed to the young person's reflective and critical processes. While some of the narratives spoke of the young person's own impetus to change, most of the narratives reveal that there were nearly always family/whānau, social services and caregivers playing a significant role in their 'wake-up calls'. These people and services often displayed ongoing belief in the young person, fostering their skills and supporting their goals, and/or were a key presence during an important, often life changing experience. Practitioners have a vital role to play with young people and can provide resources and support that are highly valued by the young person. Young people remembered and valued these relationships and would then utilise their own internal resources to alter their life path, often choosing to engage with professionals so that they could achieve this.

Turning points resulted in either a decrease or increase in young

people's agency. The latter, frequently coincided with support from social services and caregivers as well as the young person's own internal processes, the former, from situations that were viewed as outside of their control. However, for young people who experienced challenging turning points there was nearly always a willingness to use their difficult experiences as a motivation to change. Furthermore, when practitioners and other key adults responded at turning points by being supportive, young people learnt that their needs and desire for change was valued.

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