

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

# Young People's Positive Relationships with Significant Others

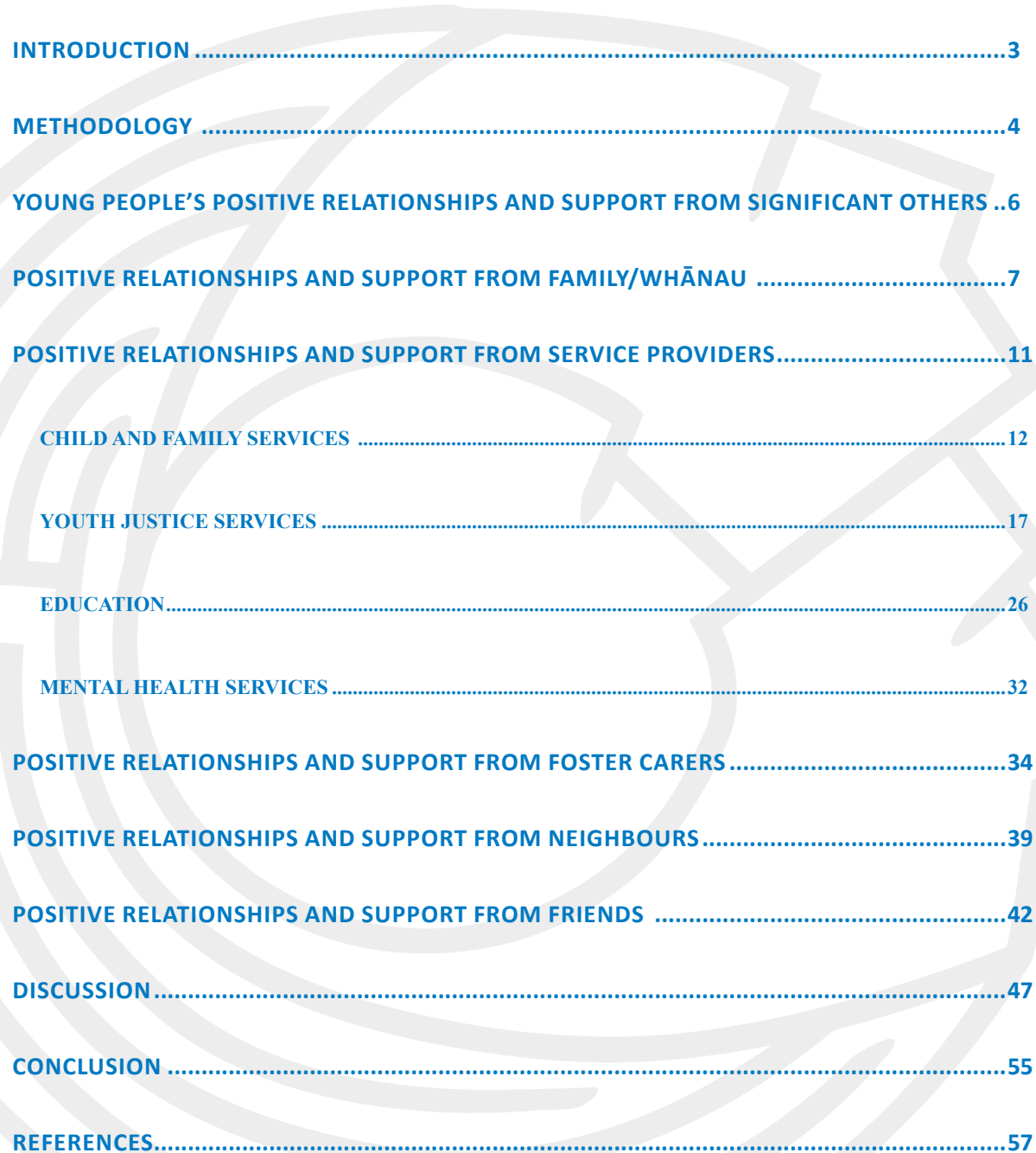
## Technical Report 22

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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 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<sup>1</sup>

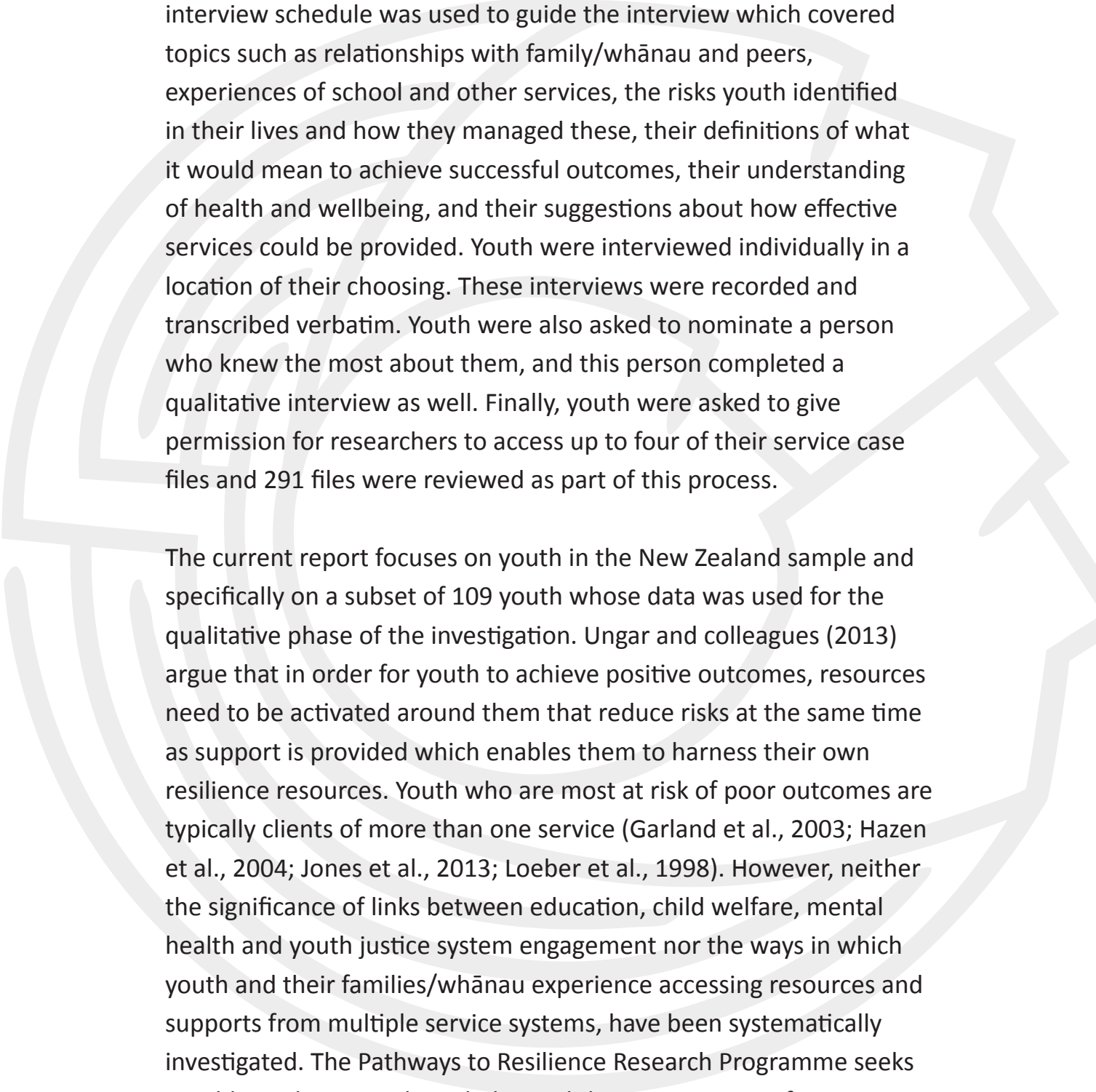
The research programme has several distinct components:

- 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 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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](#).



measure were interviewed for the qualitative phase ( $n = 109$ ). 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 et al., 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.



## YOUNG PEOPLE'S POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORT FROM SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

This report examines patterns that emerged from the analysis of one thematic node in the qualitative data set, young people's positive relationships with significant others. Positive relationships are defined as relationships that provide emotional and physical support and positive social interaction, affection, and esteem (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Sherbourne & Stewart, 1991; Yu et al., 2004). In this study the challenges and risks young people's family/whānau faced meant that they were not always able to meet their children's physical and emotional needs. For these youth other adults such as extended family/whānau members, foster parents, teachers and practitioners, became positive adult role models and a key source of support (Miller, 2003; Pianta, 1999; Ungar et al., 2012). These relationships enabled youth to form an attachment with a significant other and develop a secure base. Attachment research has shown that positive attachment to at least one person can function in a similar way to attachment to the primary caregiver (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969).

This report begins with an exploration of the positive relationships young people had with their family/whānau. It then turns to a discussion of positive relationships young people had with service providers in different service sectors. First, relationships with practitioners in child welfare services are considered. Next, relationships with youth justice practitioners are discussed and then relationships with mental health service providers. The section concludes with a discussion of young people's relationships with education service providers including the relationships young people had with teachers and other staff within mainstream education, as well as staff who provided special or alternative education services. Following this, the report examines young people's relationships with

their foster carers and then other community members and in particular neighbours. Next, young people's positive relationships with their friends are examined. The report then turns to a discussion of the significance of enduring relationships for young people, and the importance of service providers working together with other people in young people's social ecologies to support these youth.

## **POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORT FROM FAMILY/ WHĀNAU**

A number of young people in the Pathways to Resilience Research had difficult relationships with their parents (Sanders et al., 2014; Dewhurst et al., 2014b). However, many young people in the study, despite these challenges, reported that their parents were important to them, even after periods where their parents were physically and emotionally absent and may have harmed them (Dewhurst et al., 2014b). Many youth in the study discussed the supportive role that extended and immediate family/whānau played in their lives. Armstrong et al. (2005) identify a number of protective factors for youth at the family/whānau level. These factors are: consistent nurturing during the first year of life, alternative caregivers who step in when parents are not present and a multi-age network of relatives. For many young people in the study, members of their extended family/whānau had been, or were still caring for them. Often, their parents experienced challenges that impaired their ability to care for them. The young people described significant and consistent caregiving roles that extended family/whānau played in their lives. Often extended family/whānau cared for the young person when parents were struggling; the young people talked about running away and going to extended family/whānau homes because there was no food at home and/or home was not safe. For some youth, this was a formalised care



arrangement with social services, and for others an informal arrangement between immediate and extended family/whānau.

In the following narrative, Breanna<sup>2</sup>, who had been involved with services since she was a baby, discusses why she was regularly cared for by her Nan:

*Breanna: I used to get the bash from my Mum when I was about 11 or 12.*

*Interviewer: Was there anyone who helped you out, when this was happening?*

*Breanna: Yep, my Nan and my Koro, who I've lived with for 15 years. 'Cause my Mum first hit me when I was seven months old and I went back after that and then by age 11 I was back and forth out of my Nan's care. I was back and forth from there for the past four years now. Six weeks before the last term, before school ended, I was staying with my Dad. He's just down the road, around here somewhere. And then I went back to my Nan. I don't like my Dad.*

In the next narrative, Tamsin who had been involved with services since she was a child discusses being placed in the care of her Nana when her mother was unable to care for her. Tamsin's mother was a young parent and was regularly in and out of drug and alcohol rehabilitation services. As Tamsin got older, she reconnected with her mother, who was initially lenient concerning Tamsin's drug and alcohol use and 'partying'. Tamsin managed her behaviour and the dynamics of each caregiver relationship by regularly moving between their houses:

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

*Tamsin: I was pretty much bought up by my grandmother. And then moved to mum's at sort of the end of the year 'cause Nan's grumpy and like so old fashioned.*

*Interviewer: Does she miss you, your Nana, now?*

*Tamsin: Yeah. I move back, like backwards and forwards, like pretty much every six months. Get bored of mum's go to nana's, get bored of nana's go to mum's.*

In the next narrative Isaac describes being cared for by his Nana after his mother passed away; his Nana had already played a significant caregiving role with his family/whānau:

*My mum died when I was ten weeks old. She was thirty. So it was me my dad and [two older siblings]. Nana helped a lot, you know, she was like a mum to me. Dad was fine aye, he really like – that's the thing, Nana helped a lot, you know she was right there and I was just like constantly at hers. I used to like, until the age of like eleven I went down there every single day. She used to look after my sister too before mum died, so I think that's where the whole thing came in. yeah she sort of raised me. Just like when I came home from school or something I'd just go see her and when I was younger, 'cause for a while dad was on the benefit and then for a while he was working for himself, so he could always make his own hours and stuff like that so he was not always around.*

Tane's family/whānau had been involved with services since he was five due to drug and alcohol use, neglect and abuse. Tane had been in several formal and informal family/whānau and foster care placements, returning to live with his parents regularly. As Tane aged, he was influenced by his older brothers to run away from home, steal

cars and commit burglaries. When Tane's family/whānau found out about these behaviours, they responded with physical abuse, and so running away from home became a pattern for Tane. Tane eventually moved in with his Aunty, who he described as being supportive:

*Tane: I was mischief back then. I escaped from home, I'd go and steal cars you know 'cause I was experienced back then, just looking at what my older brothers do and things. Yea and I would just go steal cars and you know break into houses.*

*Interviewer: How did your parents feel about that?*

*Tane: I used to get hidings. Used to get whacks and that and told to stay home but it just made me worser. And then I'd be gone for not just the night, for a couple of weeks. You know I'd go stay with my mum's sister. That is how I got to stay with my Aunty Mel. Just started running to her house and yeah. Aunty Mel she didn't like what I was up to. She said if I don't you know buck up ideas, move out. So I started actually putting that in my head and thinking 'oh yea nah, I gotta be good'. And yea she got me onto a course [alternative education].*

For some of the young people in the study, extended family/whānau members were able to provide a safe caregiving relationship. When this happened, the young people reflected that they enjoyed staying with their extended family/whānau and felt supported by them. However, this did not always happen for the young people. Some of the youth in the study experienced significant difficulties in their relationships with their extended family/whānau. This is discussed in more detail in the report on family/whānau relationships (Dewhurst et al., 2014b). Many of the young people also reported that their siblings provided them with support. This is discussed in the report on young people's relationships with their siblings (Dewhurst et al.,

2015).

The young people in the study were involved with multiple services, and positive relationships with their service providers were important; these relationships helped young people to make sense of their service involvement, and often practitioners became an enduring presence in the young people's lives (Munford & Sanders, 2014).

## **POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORT FROM SERVICE PROVIDERS**

Young people reported on the positive relationships they established with practitioners and on the support they received from these practitioners. These practitioners often became an enduring presence in young people's lives (Munford and Sanders, 2014). Young people felt supported when practitioners made concerted efforts to spend time and build relationships with them, listened, worked beyond the call of duty, responded to their request for services and resources, advocated on behalf of the young person, and acknowledged the young person's qualities and capacities (Dewhurst et al., 2014a; Urry et al., 2014; Sanders & Munford, 2014; Stevens et al., 2014). These relationships with practitioners provided the young people with access to the emotional and relational resources they did not experience in other relationships. The resources that they were able to access through a positive relationship with a practitioner were significant in helping the young people to make sense of their histories, construct a positive and healthy identity, and develop a sense of personal agency over their futures. The following discussion outlines young people's experiences with service providers in different fields of service delivery. First, young people's relationships with child and family service providers are discussed. Following this, young people's experiences with youth justice service providers are

examined. Next, young people's relationships with education providers, in mainstream and alternative education, are explored. Finally, the discussion turns to young people's relationships with mental health service providers.

### **Child and family services**

A significant proportion of the young people in the study were involved with child welfare services, often from a young age. Many of these young people had disrupted relationships with their family/whānau, either due to being placed away from their parents' care, or due to the significant challenges faced by their family/whānau (Dewhurst et al., 2014b). Young people sometimes struggled to make sense of their involvement with child and family services, and often pushed away these adults because they had been let down by other adults who did not keep them safe. However, some young people developed positive relationships with their social workers. These relationships helped young people to make sense of their experiences and have hope for their future (Greenberger et al., 1998; Munford & Sanders, 2014). Hine's narrative illustrates the importance of a positive relationship with a social worker.

Hine had a difficult history; she was brought up by her grandfather after her parents were unable to care for her. After Hine's grandfather died when she was 12, her extended family/whānau did not maintain a consistent caregiving role due to their challenges in caring for their children. Hine was placed with several foster caregivers, and each caregiver found her behaviours (regular absconding and drug and alcohol use) difficult to manage. Hine recalled having a supportive relationship with a social service practitioner, who she described as her '*government mummy*':

*Interviewer: What stands out as the best thing that someone's*

*done for you?*

*Hine: My social worker. I love her so much she's just pure awesomeness... I can't really explain it. She's always been there she's like a real mummy. She's my government mummy. She's really cool. I am still in contact with her even though I am not with [service] anymore.*

There were a small number of young people in the study who, like Hine, had not experienced stable caregiving arrangements or supportive relationships with adults. For these young people, having a positive relationship with a social worker provided them with a secure base from which they could seek new support networks (Munford & Sanders, 2014).

As well as providing emotional and relational support to young people, practitioners in child and family services also worked with other agencies to provide the young people with important opportunities such as supporting a return to education. For example, working alongside alternative education providers who gave young people another opportunity to re-engage with education. In the next narrative, Ben, whose family/whānau had been involved with child and family services since he was a child, described how services worked together to support him to enrol in a course:

*The [services] worked together to help me. I got into [a youth programme] through [the service]. I was calling [the service] asking if I can join [the programme] and they got in touch with someone and then my caseworker came to me saying we got a place for you at [the youth programme]... I chucked everything in my bag zipped it jumped in the car and then [the service] flew me to [the city where the programme was held]. That relationship was good, primo. Best experience I've got or ever*



*had, done.*

Many of the young people reflected that the practical support their social workers provided was helpful for them. For a number of these young people, the hope that their future could be better was a prospect they had not considered. When practitioners were able to facilitate opportunities for youth to participate in programmes where they could learn new skills or gain qualifications, young people reported that they felt that practitioners understood them and listened to their views. Practical support that fulfilled the goals of young people was one way in which practitioners were able to develop a positive relationship with young people.

Some of the young people in the study reflected on what made them feel supported by a practitioner. Niko recalled that services became regularly involved in his life when he was six. Niko's parents were heavy drug users, and Niko described wanting to stop their harmful behaviours, aware of the negative impact their actions had on him and his siblings. Niko and his siblings were often in non-family/whānau foster care. Niko discussed how he was able to identify a genuine practitioner:

*Niko: Elaine (social worker) definitely helped out heaps. It's the way she presents herself that definitely got my attention. It wasn't all about the system it was all about me and what I needed to be involved in and what I needed to do. She listened to me. She actually listened it didn't go in one ear and out the other.*

*Interviewer: Was it quite easy for you to recognise the difference between someone that was listening and genuinely cared and someone who was just trying to meet the rules?*

*Niko: You can, you can. I know it's hard to explain you can see the real people and fakes. And I guess the fakes just put a mask up and pretend to be somebody else. That's what most of them have been like, you know.*

Ariana also described what made her relationship with her social worker a positive experience. Services had been involved with her family/whānau for neglect and abuse since she was two. There were times when she moved between multiple households, and she had been in full time care from the age of fourteen. She responded positively to being placed in a residential home, where her schooling improved and she enjoyed having a routine. Ariana lived there for two years (until she was 17). Ariana's social worker in residence was particularly supportive of her:

*Interviewer: What would a good social worker look like for you?*

*Ariana: Um actually doing what they promise, yeah, Marie (social worker), she's like one of the best social workers ever, which I've ever had, 'cause she supports me and completes and does what she says she's going to do.*

*Interviewer: So when she says something she follows through.*

*Ariana: Yeah and it doesn't really take her long so I find that really good... And when I leave here I want to study to be a social worker.*

Ariana's and Niko's narratives highlight the importance of ensuring that young people feel listened to in relationships with service providers. Young people in the study reflected that it was important that service providers were genuine in their work with youth, and that they made sure that their work did not focus solely

on 'the system' and the 'paper work'. Young people said that it was important that they felt valued by practitioners and that their needs were viewed as important and worthwhile. For some young people, who had not experienced adults as being reliable sources of support, service providers were able to help change their understanding of how a positive relationship with adults functioned; that is, promises were followed through and the young person's views were taken into consideration when making decisions about their care.

It is evident from the young people's narratives that feeling supported by practitioners depended on relational and internal dimensions and the resources and support young people were able to draw on in different service contexts. Hine experienced the support from her social service practitioner in a relational context, as her '*government mummy*', who took on a caregiving role when Hine's family/whānau were unable to. Ben felt supported in his relationship with his social service practitioner, when they followed through with his request to attend an education programme and provided him with the necessary resources to attend this programme. Niko's positive experience with a practitioner had a relational context, he felt he could trust the practitioner when he knew that she listened to him and was genuine and honest. Ariana felt supported when the practitioner followed through in a timely manner with what they said they would do, and this positive experience, inspired her to want to be a practitioner one day. The narratives young people shared also show how a supportive relationship with a social worker can inspire young people's hopes and dreams for the future, for example, when Ariana shared her desire to be a social worker.

For many youth in the study, feeling supported by practitioners rested on the relational dimensions of their interactions, demonstrated when they attended their meetings, provided resources, and followed through with what they said they would do. Practitioners played

important supportive roles in young people's lives, underlining the evidence that when 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, such as having the confidence to return to an educational programme (Kearns, 2014; Ungar et al., 2012).

### Youth justice services

A high number of young people in this study had involvement with youth justice services, often precipitated by their disengagement with education (Dewhurst et al., 2014c; Urry et al., 2014). Young people described the supportive relationships with practitioners in youth justice services. 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, residential placement and foster care) and attending to their unmet educational needs through enrolment in courses and counselling. The young people's narratives reveal how practitioners supported and helped them address the underlying causes of their offending behaviour.

Patrick's family/whānau were on the periphery of gangs. In his interview, he described moving house and changing schools multiple times throughout his childhood, and that violence was a 'normal' part of his life. Patrick was excluded from school when he was 14, and around the same time came to the attention of the youth justice system. During his involvement with youth justice services, Patrick experienced many supportive relationships with practitioners:

*Interviewer: What support do you have in [the residence]?*

*Patrick: I've been supported um by my [youth justice social worker] and the [social worker] from that home. And the staff in residence is what makes it a house like. So the staff in the house they pretty much control your day, and if they're gonna make it good, then the environment is going to be a happy place.*

He found it particularly helpful when his social workers talked to each other and arranged for him to enrol in a course:

*Interviewer: Who helped you get onto the course? Who helped you make that happen?*

*Patrick: The social worker, 'cause there was this [social worker] who knew [a youth worker] and there was [my youth justice residence worker] and they just all had this little talk and they just sorted it out.*

Danny also felt supported by his youth justice workers. Danny and his family/whānau had been involved with services since he was six. He was often in the care of extended family/whānau and foster caregivers and expressed that he did not like seeing his mum 'being hassled' by services. Danny did not regularly attend school and became involved with gangs when he was twelve. Danny recalled how he felt supported by practitioners while in a youth justice residence:

*Danny: Pretty much all the [practitioners] and the whole [youth programme] were really helpful. Kept me self-motivated all the time. Just motivated hard that kept me out of trouble. Keep you occupied instead of being bored. There was nothing wrong with [youth justice programme], I'd go back any day.*

Patrick and Danny's narratives show that their placement in youth

justice residences were experienced as supportive (Urry et al., 2014). In addition to taking them out of challenging environments, where their difficult behaviours were often connected to their involvement with risky peers (Urry et al., 2015) and providing structure and activities, residences offered many programmes that addressed unmet educational needs. Young people said that residential placements gave them the space to exit difficult peer relationships, 'detox' from drug and alcohol use, and achieve in ways that they had never considered possible (Urry et al., 2014; 2015). Patrick and Danny describe their relationships with practitioners while in these settings as supportive, which facilitated their desire to make big changes in their lives.

Young people who have been involved with youth justice services often participate in an FGC<sup>3</sup>. In this process victims of young people's criminal activity get the opportunity to participate in the FGC process as a means of enacting restorative justice (Stevens et al., 2013). This can provide an important opportunity for young people to consider the effects of their offending on other people. Ben shared his reflections on having the victim of his offending at his FGC:

*Interviewer: What have your experiences with youth justice been like?*

*Ben: Mostly good. Like um this lady [victim from young person's family group conference (FGC)], she was a good lady. She did heaps. Went to a FGC, and after that she didn't want me to pay for the stuff I stole off her, she just told me I can come around*

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3 The Family Group Conference (FGC) is at the heart of the New Zealand youth justice procedures. An FGC is a restorative justice process, bringing together the young person, victim(s), family/whānau and practitioners to foster accountability and resolution around the young person's offending. FGC's are both a pre-charge mechanism to determine whether prosecution can be avoided and also as a post-charge mechanism to determine how to deal with cases admitted or proved in the Youth Court (The Ministry of Justice, 2014).



*and help her do the gardens do some weeding, do a few chores and I ended up doing everything. It was the bomb.*

At his youth justice FGC Ben asked the practitioner to place him in specialised programme and this enabled him to make positive changes to his behaviour. Ben felt supported when the people involved with his FGC, cared about and noticed the positive changes he was making. Furthermore, by becoming involved with the FGC process, the victim gave Ben a powerful opportunity to take responsibility for his offending and make amends for his actions (Henry et al., 2014).

Other youth justice services also provided positive support. For example, young people who have experienced Rangitahi Court and rangitahi programmes have reported improved attitudes and behaviour and shown responsibility for their offending and its impact on others (The Youth Court Aotearoa/New Zealand, 2014). The findings from this study support this. Several young people described supportive relationships with matua (elders/teachers), who taught them life skills, Tikanga Māori (general behaviour guidelines for daily life and interaction in Māori culture) and helped them develop a sense of identity and belonging as a member of a whānau, hapū and iwi. In the following narrative Hemi, who had been involved with services from the age of three and was brought up by his Koro due to his caregivers' drug and alcohol use, described the support provided to him by matua at a rangitahi programme:

*Hemi: It was mean-as, we learnt bush experience. We went up the bush, diving, fishing all that stuff, outdoors stuff. I was there for six months. The matua, the tutors were mean as. They are like 30 or 40. There is a fulla Tama... he was hard-out. Every day we did stuff. Diving, went up to the bush for pig hunting like every second week. Yeah, that was mean-as. We were roaming*

*around on this big as truck. Another matua, Dain, he taught me how to play guitar and draw, heaps of stuff. He taught me how to respect the land. He was into his spiritual kind of stuff. It was all good.*

*Interviewer: How is your life different now?*

*Hemi: I am not into trouble much now because, yeah, when I came back mum and dad started respecting me. When I got that respect and love I didn't need anything else.*

*Interviewer: How did they show you that they loved you?*

*Hemi: The freedom to do what I want, without getting into trouble, trusting me yeah.*

For Hemi, having a supportive relationship with the matua in his rangitahi programme helped him to develop a sense of confidence and respect and he also learned skills that would help him keep out of trouble. This helped to facilitate an improved relationship with his family/whānau. These positive outcomes were in part facilitated by the relationship he had with the matua and illustrate the important role services can have in changing developmental pathways. In supporting Hemi, the matua were able to help him explore a new identity as a young person who was worthy of respect (Munford & Sanders, 2014).

Robbie described the support he experienced in a rangitahi youth programme:

*Interviewer: So who helped you to see that it was not worth getting into trouble?*

*Robbie: The [matua] helped me. They were telling me to not come back, and to stay out of trouble. They gave me life skills; diving, fishing, hunting. And my family supported me too. They stuck by me. They came to every court case for support, they rung around and got me help, just anything in any way to possible support me, yeah and they like show me how hard it was on them too as well as myself when I was getting in trouble so, like the effect of my behaviour on them, yeah.*

As Hemi and Robbie highlight, the supportive relationships with matua in Rangitahi Court and rangitahi targeted programmes helped them to make positive changes to their behaviour. The supportive relationships with the matua fostered a positive connection with their culture and provided them with skill based learning and activities. Hemi and Robbie's narratives show how powerful this process can be when family/whānau are also supporting them to make these changes (Henry et al., 2014).

When young people and their family/whānau face challenges, having support from services has been found to play a protective/supportive role (Huey et al., 2000; Kumpfar et al., 2003). 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). Young people in the study were often reluctant to seek support from services if they felt that their family/whānau did not agree with their decisions (Dewhurst et al., 2014a; 2014b). However, some young people reflected that their family/whānau helped them to become involved with services and to stay engaged with the interventions that were put in place. Kahu shared

his narrative about this.

Kahu became involved with gangs, drug use and crime when he was 15, which led to youth justice involvement. Throughout his involvement with youth justice services, Kahu felt that services and his family/whānau were all on board to help him. During the course of his FGC, Kahu, with support from his mother and his social worker, was connected with a rangitahi youth programme. Several members of his family/whānau supported him when he returned from the rangitahi youth programme:

*Interviewer: What sort of supports were in place?*

*Kahu: I got sent up north to a course up there. Got put out in the bush for 3 or 4 months. And yeah that was alright. It was shit at the start, to be honest. And when I went up there, like being from town and stuff, and they are just rugged. I was like, oh hell, I am out of here. And then I bailed, and then [laugh] I was seeing how long the walk was, and it was like, nah, I will just go back. I rang mum and said I am leaving. And she said, no don't. Think about it. I was like yeah. Otherwise I am just going to end up in trouble again. And it is better to get it over and done with while I was still a youth. So I just turned around and went back, and took it on the chin. Yeah, after then I was sweet, like they treated me good as up there.... My parents wanted me to do [educational course], and my uncle rung mum up just after I got back from up north, and said that he would help with enrolling, if I wanted to do the course and to go in and sign up. And he gave me like a pamphlet and stuff that explained like everything that they cover and to think about the course.*

*Interviewer: So talking more about the relationship you had with your mum and family, how do you think that those relationships*

*have been affected by the services that you have used?*

*Kahu: Ah, I dunno 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 [services and family/whānau] out there that care. Because they are trying to help you, so help yourself. I think she felt quite good being supported, like 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.*

Kahu's narrative shows that when youth feel supported by services and their family/whānau they can address their harmful behaviours. By encouraging youth to stay on track with their education, focusing on their strengths and skills, as well as supporting them to attend interventions and utilise the help on offer, family/whānau can support youth to make significant positive changes in their lives. Research has demonstrated that parents who engage with services are able to provide high levels of emotional and practical support to their children and report improved parenting and child/parent relationships over time when compared to disadvantaged parents without support (Huey et al., 2000; Kumpfar et al., 2003; Marra et al., 2009).

Other young people also reflected on the support their family/whānau gave them when they were involved with youth justice services. For many of these young people, their entry into offending and subsequent youth justice processes often brought their drug and alcohol misuse, experiences of abuse and unmet educational needs to the fore, as this was the first time that their family/whānau and services focused on their personal challenges and difficulties. Many of these youth had prior involvement with services, due to caregiving challenges in the family/whānau. Isaiah discussed that

there was often no food in the house when he was a child; his mother struggled financially and was always 'having to borrow money and then pay it back'. Isaiah connected with a gang and became a drug dealer when he was eleven and through doing this Isaiah could go out and 'get some money' for food. When his offending led to youth justice involvement, his family/whānau's attendance at these hearings was where he first experienced feeling supported by them:

*Isaia: I got in trouble with the cops and then I got transferred to a boys' home.*

*Interviewer: Ok. Who was supporting you during these times?*

*Isaia: My family.*

*Interviewer: How do you feel they supported you?*

*Isaia: Coming to my court cases. Coming to my FGC.*

Sionne discusses how his youth justice family group conference (FGC) helped him feel heard by his family/whānau:

*Interviewer: And when you got involved with youth justice that first time who did you have at the family group conference who you felt um, was helping you.*

*Sionne: My dad and my aunty.*

*Interviewer: I'm just wondering if they said anything or did anything that was helpful.*

*Sionne: Oh like be able to tell them like what I thought. So like I can get rid of my anger, I can throw it out there, like tell them so*



*they can help me.*

*Interviewer: Ok so you felt like you could get rid of the anger, tell it to them and then they could help you. Did anything come out of the family group conference that was helpful?*

*Sionne: Yea it helped. It's why my family took me to the [alternative education].*

Isaia and Sionne felt supported when their family/whānau attended their FGCs and court cases. Although Isaia's family/whānau showed him support when they attended his FGC and youth court, he continued to offend and attributed this to his membership of a gang. Sionne was able to express his feelings to his family/whānau in the FGC and reflected that this led to his family/whānau helping him re-engage with his education.

## **Education**

Several youth in the study described the supportive role that teachers and other school staff played in their lives. Next to family/whānau, teachers spend the most time with vulnerable young people, and the support they extend to them can play a protective role (Dewhurst et al., 2014c). As teachers and other school staff come into regular contact with youth, they are in a position to identify, through changes in youth behaviours, such as aggression or a drop in school attendance, that youth are experiencing challenges such as abuse and difficulties in the home (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2006). Teachers and other school staff in mainstream and alternative education settings, worked closely with youth. Many of the young people in the study felt that they could trust their teachers with information about what was happening for them outside of school. Zara shared her story about a supportive teacher. Zara grew

up in a challenging home; her father was violent and Zara described how her mother would leave him after an assault, and would then go back to the relationship, believing that he was ready to change. Zara became a critical observer of her parent's behaviour, and described feeling let down every time her mother promised Zara that she would not go back to her father, and then returned to the relationship. The bewildering, unsafe dynamics of this abusive relationship had a negative influence on Zara and she became depressed and anxious from being exposed to her father's violent and abusive behaviour and from worrying about her mother's safety. Despite these challenges, Zara was engaged with her education and was supported by one of her teachers, who was concerned for her and checked in with her friends and Zara when he had concerns:

*Zara: Mum keeps saying she will leave him, but then she goes back and I am really sick of it...But my teacher, he knows and is really supportive and when I said I wanted to move out of home at the start of the year, him and his wife that works in my school as well told me that I could move in there. That is how close he is to me.*

*Interviewer: Wow, so he knows what has happened for you.*

*Zara: Yeah. We don't really talk about that it is more because he goes to my friends and talks to them, not necessarily me. But then when he does come to me, he is like, 'are you alright' and then I tell him what happened...When it happened [mother assaulted by father] my Deans and him like talked and all that, I don't know what he talked about.*

*Interviewer: So he talks to your friends because he is worried about you. And do your friends tell you that or does he tell you that he has talked to them.*

*Zara: He doesn't go very low key, like he does it in class... But like I will be just sitting there in class and I will be like real down and then he will just be like, like put all the attention on me to make me laugh. And I will be like 'oh my god, go away, I just want to be by myself', but then I just crack up and he makes my day.*

Zara's teacher was an adult who cared about and took an interest in her wellbeing at a time when her mother was in an abusive relationship. For Zara, having an adult in her life who recognised her struggles and responded to her individual needs was valuable and the support she received enabled her to remain in school.

Sean shared his narrative about having a supportive relationship with his school principal. For Sean, knowing that there was an adult at school who could help him manage his special educational needs was an important part of helping him to remain at school:

*I went to [a primary school] and I was there for a couple of years. Um yeah, I had a real understanding with the principal there, like, I would still go off the rails a little bit, but he put things in place. Like, if I did something stupid then I wasn't allowed in my classroom for a week... I would have to go and sit in the hallway and I wasn't really allowed to talk to anyone... And yeah, it actually worked quite well. I did get angry a couple of times, but he was always understanding about like that I can say sorry. I had to write letters... I definitely had to say sorry for what I did... He would sit there and he could talk to me and he would talk about it and stuff. It was just good knowing that there was someone there.*

For many young people, staying engaged with education was a challenge; some of the youth in the study had special educational needs that were not met within the mainstream education system,

and others felt like they did not belong at their school (Dewhurst et al., 2014c; Stevens et al., 2014c). For these young people, having a positive relationship with a teacher or staff member helped them to feel supported to stay engaged with education. As Sean explained, knowing that there was someone there who would take the time to talk to him about his challenges was important. He felt that someone understood his needs, and was 'on his team', encouraging him to try again when he was angry.

In the following narrative, Lewis, who discussed having anger issues and 'self-medicating' with marijuana to calm himself down, was taken out of mainstream school due to his aggressive outbursts and drug use. Lewis described the support he experienced at an alternative education course:

*Interviewer: What were your experiences like at mainstream school?*

*Lewis: It sucked. I didn't like it. School just wasn't for me. I'd just rather go get stoned than go to class.*

*Interviewer: And did that change at [alternative education]?*

*Lewis: Yeah, it started too. Like at first I was going to get stoned, then I just stopped it cause I was like if they snap me then I'm gonna get kicked out. So I stopped going stoned and smoking weed. [Alternative education provider] changed me hard aye. When I was a bit younger I just had a different attitude, didn't really want to do things and then yeah they just changed me. Like when they asked me if I want to do something, when I first went there, I was like "nah I don't want to do that, that's dumb" and then I started changing, I was like, "yeah I'll come, that's cool". Just changed me. I still see them, I'm going there on*

*Thursday. The teacher would pick me up and go fishing and diving and stuff when I was just sitting at home just bored. So, I didn't get into trouble or anything.*

In the study, many youth found engaging with education challenging when they did not have access to supportive relationships with staff members and their peers at school (Dewhurst et al., 2014c; Stevens et al., 2014c; Urry et al., 2014, 2015). It was important to the young people that their teachers encouraged them to try again when they slipped up, rather than resorting to disciplinary actions that did not address their underlying issues (Dewhurst et al., 2014c). When the teacher at Lewis's alternative education course responded supportively to his needs, Lewis changed his view of school as a difficult place. This supportive relationship fostered his engagement in education and a return to school. Feeling like he belonged at school motivated him to stop using drugs.

Troy felt that his alternative education teachers supported him to complete his education; he felt that he was 'not alone' when he was having difficulties, and knew that the teachers understood his history and how it affected his life:

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

Young people in the study reflected on a range of ways that teachers and other school staff supported them. The young people

were often involved with two or more services simultaneously. Some of the young people discussed how their teachers helped them by working with them to engage with other services. For example, Nick felt supported when the staff from his alternative education course, his mother and friends turned up to his youth justice court hearings. He described the teachers as 'family/whānau':

*Nick: I was supported by the [alternative education programme]. 'Cause they were like another family.*

*Interviewer: How did you know they were supporting you?*

*Nick: They came to every court case. My mum would pop up, and [teacher] would pop up. The last time the whole course came to my court case.*

Staff at alternative education courses often recognised how unmet needs outside of school restricted young people's engagement with education (Dewhurst et al., 2014c). These programmes provided youth with access to relational and skill based resources such as, excursions and outdoor activities and being available for youth to contact after school hours (Dewhurst et al., 2014c; Urry et al., 2014). These are the normative developmental resources that other young people at this age had access to but were often not readily available for these young people.

Zara's, Sean's, Lewis's, and Nick's narratives show that vulnerable young people respond positively to supportive relationships with teachers at school and at alternative education programmes. Vulnerable youth, whose caregivers are facing challenges and may be unable to meet their needs, often respond positively to additional support from their teachers. As Zara highlights, her teacher attended to the underlying issues that were impacting on her education,




showing an active concern for her wellbeing. Sean's principal supported him to deal with his anger and Lewis's teacher spent time with him outside of school, involving him in excursions and activities that kept Lewis out of trouble. Nick felt that having the staff from his alternative education course attend his youth justice court hearings was supportive; he felt that they were like 'family/whānau' to him.

### **Mental health services**

Several youth in the study were involved with mental health services. These young people often experienced some stigma around being involved with these services, which made it challenging for them to feel comfortable going to see a counsellor, psychiatrist, or other mental health support person. However, there were many young people in the study who felt supported by their service provider, and this helped them to stay engaged with the service.

Jane shared her reflections on what helped her to stop using drugs when she was involved with a mental health service:

*You just have to be there for the person, like the extra mile like how Lena (social worker) said 'if you don't txt me I'll find you' and she did find me, took me to [a café]... And she just talked to me and said 'it's got to stop' [drug use] but she talked to me on my level when she was talking to me, she wasn't talking to me as this person that had to do their job, I was real to her, it helped... I learned to tell the truth to them. Like, they'd ask what are you on, what have you taken? And they'd note it down and I just became honest, like 'yeah I smoked it yesterday, I'm coming off it now, things aren't that great'... When I was honest, they were happy with it... They wanted to help me but they couldn't help me if I wasn't being honest.*



For Jane, a positive relationship with her social worker helped her to feel safe and supported when she was giving up drugs. Jane recalled facing a range of challenges in giving up drugs; she found it difficult to separate herself from her old social group and would often see her drug using friends in town. However, she knew that she could rely on her social worker to help her manage these challenges. Knowing that she was a ‘real’ person to her social worker gave her confidence in their relationship and helped her feel motivated to make big changes in her life.

Another young person who had a supportive relationship with his mental health service provider was Jackson. Jackson had mental health needs, and was also involved with youth justice services. In his interview, he discussed how he felt supported by his mental health service providers, who worked with him while he was in a youth justice residence. Jackson recalled that his service provider tried to support him to find additional service support after he turned 18; however, he did not meet the service criteria. Jackson found this frustrating, but was appreciative of the effort of his service provider. He reflected on his relationship with his service provider: *“They make you family... It’s just the feeling you get every time they turn up to see you”*.

For Jackson, feeling that his service providers respected him was important; he felt that he was important to them and felt that he ‘belonged’ with the service. He felt valued by the service provider and knew that they would support him as much as they could until he found alternative support after he aged out of the service.

Penny felt that her mental health providers supported her and helped her feel safe. She reflected that she had often felt unsafe with her family/whānau. After being placed away from their care and becoming involved with mental health services, she began to feel that

someone cared about her:

*It's safe for me here and I feel like the staff are supporting me while I'm here, caring for me... Basically in my life, it hasn't really been safe, it's basically been violent... Here, they help me, they tenderly care for me... They support my family.*

Penny had long-term involvement with mental health services and reflected that it was important that her service providers cared about her. She noted that even though her family/whānau had not been protective of her, it was important that services still supported them and her, and this was part of what made Penny feel comfortable engaging with the service. Penny identified that feeling cared for was a new experience for her, and that it made her feel safe.

Formal service involvement helped many of the young people build positive relationships with adults who could support them. Through their involvement with multiple services, young people developed their self-confidence and sense of identity, learned new skills, and worked towards addressing the challenges they faced and made changes in their lives. Some of the young people experienced significant challenges in their family/whānau which meant that they could not live with their parents. These young people were placed into foster care. In the next section, young people's narratives about positive relationships with their foster carers are explored.

## **POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORT FROM FOSTER CARERS**

In this section, young people discuss their supportive relationships with foster carers. Ideally, youth are placed with extended family/whānau when their primary caregivers are struggling with parenting; however, sometimes no suitable family/whānau placement can be

arranged. In this case, youth are placed in foster care with a non-family/whānau member (Child, Youth and Family, 2014). The literature on foster care suggests that youth who are in foster care, whether short term (Reilly et al., 2003) or long term (Triseliotis, 2002), may experience a wide range of poor outcomes. Conversely another study, by Courtney and colleagues (2001), indicated that the majority of youth interviewed felt supported by their foster carers and were satisfied with the care they received. Youth who are placed into foster care have often experienced a range of challenges in their family/whānau, and their experience of caregiver instability can contribute to their ongoing challenges (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013). However, a positive relationship with at least one supportive adult, such as a foster carer, has been shown to lessen the effects of caregiver instability across the lifespan (Gilligan, 2000). Several youth in the study entered foster care for short periods of time while services worked with their family/whānau to address their caregiver's challenges, while some youth were placed in long term, at times permanent foster care arrangements. These youth reflected on the support they received from their foster carers.

Tony had been involved with services since he was a baby. He was diagnosed with ADHD when he was seven and his mother and stepfather struggled with the day to care of him and his siblings, at times becoming physically and verbally abusive. Tony would often burst into tears at school, distressed about being teased by the other children and out of frustration as he struggled with his learning. He was taken in by a family friend, who became his formal long term foster carer:

*Interviewer: So tell me about Leslie because she is your foster parent that you went to when you were about 12 or 13?*

*Tony: Well Leslie knew my Mum from the time that I was born*

*basically. Yeah. And then like my Mum suggested to Leslie that [social service] were putting me in another home where I didn't know the people, and that, and Leslie agreed to have me so [service] set it all up. She started looking after me, and then she was pregnant with her youngest one that she's got now. He looked up to me like his brother when I was living there.*

*Interviewer: And so what was different about being living with Leslie as opposed to living with your Mum?*

*Tony: Leslie just knew me better, and how to handle my behaviours when I was in trouble and that. She used to set down the rules, and like with my Mum, she did do that, but I just wouldn't listen to my Mum. And there's something about Leslie that did make me listen and that 'cause she was good... And I have done a lot more things now [Leslie took him on outdoor excursions and supported his interest in sport] that I wouldn't have done with my Mum.*

This relationship was an enduring presence in Tony's life. Before becoming his formal carer, he was regularly at the foster carer's house when his mother wanted respite, often for weeks on end. He then lived with the foster carer for five years once the arrangement was formalised. Tony continued to struggle with his education, and was diagnosed with a mild intellectual disability when he was 16, and moved into assisted living. However, he remained connected with his foster carer, who he regularly turned to for approval, advice and support.

For young people like Tony, foster carers were an enduring presence in their lives. The young people knew that they could rely on their foster carers to be supportive of them and help them in ways that their family/whānau may not have been able to. This was particularly

important when the young people's family/whānau were not able to meet their physical or emotional needs, as it helped the young people to build new understandings of the ways in which relationships could function.

Tane regularly ran away from home as a child, his family/whānau were involved with gangs and services had been involved with his family/whānau since he was five. Tane remembers being placed in several foster care arrangements as a child, and one in particular he experienced as positive:

*Interviewer: So what was that foster care like, tell me about that.*

*Tane: Cool as. I was happy there, because of the people that were looking after me, they were kind. I did lots of things with them. Physical stuff... I kept out of trouble for two years. It was actually quite cool up there in the wop wops, lots to do and kept out of trouble rode horses, rode motorbikes, chase the cows, yea milk, fishing. Heaps of things, yeah.*

Danny and his family/whānau had been involved with services since he was a child. Danny discussed having several different caregivers throughout his life including being placed in residential care. There was one foster carer that Danny remembered as being supportive:

*Interviewer: So with both [social service] and [youth justice] you were actually placed away from the whānau?*

*Danny: Yeah for six weeks. But the longest I been away from my family was two years... I was put with a fosterer. That was mean as. They taught me to pig hunt... I like being able to go hunting and get a feed for my family.*



Tane and Danny both recalled positive foster care experiences that were long term, where they were involved in activities that kept them out of trouble, and helped them develop life skills. In the study, young people's family/whānau, for various reasons, such as limited resources, time and personal issues, often could not provide youth with these opportunities. Tane and Danny's experiences in foster care opened up opportunities and enabled them to learn new skills. As a result of these experiences Danny could show that he cared for his family/whānau by going hunting and providing them with food and Tane recognised that living away from town had been the main reason he had kept out of trouble for two years, as he was no longer being influenced by his peers.

Niko was cared for by the same foster carers throughout his childhood and adolescence. His family/whānau struggled with drug and alcohol abuse, and while he would return to live with them from time to time, this was often short lived due to their ongoing struggles with their addiction. When he was 13 he started offending with his brother, and went into a youth justice residence. Around the same time, Niko also struggled with his mental health, which resulted in mental health service involvement. Throughout all of his challenges, Niko's foster carers consistently supported him and while they found his behaviours challenging, they continued to care for him, always taking him back into their home after periods when he lived with a family/whānau member or had been in specialist care:

*Niko: Um my dad's definitely not involved in my life and my mum sometimes and definitely [my long term foster parents]. About 3 months after I was born [fosterers] came into my life and have been here ever since... I was definitely well looked after by them, in saying that my mum had different priorities, different ways of growing up but still there was love in there.*

*Interviewer: And you still keep in contact with your mum?*

*Niko: Not really. I only wanted to keep in contact with her if she sorts her life out, which she is starting to, but I want to see the end result. Reason being is my sister's coming back um in about a month or so and I just want her to carry on through school, I don't want her bunking school or not going to school just 'cause my mum says, you don't have to.*

Niko describes that he was well looked after and supported by his foster carers; they were an enduring presence throughout his life. While this could not mitigate some of the more challenging aspects of his family/whānau relationships, the foster carers' consistent support and willingness to bring him back into their life after periods where his behaviour was difficult, was protective for Niko.

Niko's experience highlights the challenges many foster carers face when looking after vulnerable youth; often their behaviours are challenging, disruptive and at times, cause harm. Niko's foster carers' willingness to try again with him indicate that their regard and care for him went beyond his behaviours; they were able to understand that Niko's challenges were as a result of his life experiences.

## **POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORT FROM NEIGHBOURS**

In this section, young people from the study describe seeking informal support from non-family/whānau adults in their local community. Alongside parents and extended family/whānau, young people often have informal caregiving relationships with their neighbours (McLaren, 2002; Ungar, 2012). Having access to a safe house can buffer some of the challenges young people experience in their caregiver relationships, and neighbours often witness and have

knowledge about the challenges in the young person's family/whānau. Alongside teachers, neighbours often contact social services out of concerns for children and their family/whānau's wellbeing (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2006). Kevin, whose father was in prison for assaulting his mother (resulting in her hospitalisation) and regularly sold all of their goods to buy drugs, described seeking out support from his neighbours when his father became violent:

*I was about eight and the beatings got worse and worse till the point like um there was a neighbourhood family there who lived next to us, um the [surname of family] and they were alright. I don't think they were as dodge as my parents because I remember [neighbour] telling me off for shit that I would just do at home and mum and dad wouldn't care so yeah I guess they weren't that bad. But um yeah so it got to the stage where um dad smacked mum up and she was on the lawn and the neighbours called the cops.*

Gemma, who was cared for by her neighbours since she was six, continued to find these relationships important as an adolescent:

*The people that I used to live next to when I was younger well they are my best friends now. When I was a younger I used to stay there every weekend, because my mother was like a solo-parent it was quite hard to deal with all us kids. So I used to go over there every weekend, it was kinda like, a second home.*

Marama, who was regularly physically abused by her father, described running to her neighbour's house for safety. Marama's extended family/whānau and neighbours contacted services on multiple occasions as they were concerned about her wellbeing. Her mother denied the abuse to services, out of fear that Marama's

father would retaliate with more violence:

*I could see that dad was gonna give me the bash, he would get this look about him and go out the back to get the stick. I use to run to my neighbours across the road to be safe. I just trusted them.*

For Kevin, Gemma and Marama, running to their neighbours was a way to keep safe; however, this did not ensure the resolution of these challenging situations. Women in violent relationship have been found to turn to informal support from their neighbours, out of fear and shame of seeking formal support by contacting professionals (Snell-Rood, 2014; Thompson et al., 2000). The role that neighbours play for youth experiencing challenges with their family/whānau provides similar support insofar that these relationships have the potential to play a protective role for youth exposed to risks in the home. As these young people show, neighbours will often informally take young people into their care, to give them somewhere safe to go and give their caregivers respite. Neighbours also sought the formal support of professionals, when members of the family/whānau for various reasons, such as fear, guilt and shame, did not seek professional help.

For a large number of young people in the study, friends were a significant source of support. Positive relationships with friends helped young people to manage the challenges they were facing, and sometimes these relationships also encouraged them to make changes in the decisions they were making. The following section discusses these experiences.

## POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORT FROM FRIENDS

In this section, the positive support that young people received from their friends is explored. It is part of normative development for young people to seek support from their friends (Jackson, 2002; Schonert-Reichlet & Muller, 1996); however, the young people in the study sometimes turned to their friends to meet their basic needs, such as shelter and stable caregiving relationships. Some of the youth were reluctant to engage with professionals when they needed help, and instead turned to their friends for support. The support that friendships provide for vulnerable youth has been found to mitigate some of the harmful effects of stressors in young people's lives, for example, family/whānau instability (Sanders et al., 2014a; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005). Additionally, positive relationships with close friends has been shown to increase young people's self-esteem and help-seeking behaviours, which can lessen the risk of compromised mental health (Kirk, 2002; Sanders et al., 2014a; Schonert-Reichlet & Muller, 1996). In the following narratives, the young people discuss the supportive and caregiving roles that their friends played. These friends connected the young people with services that could help them address their challenges and helped them to exit harmful situations, at times taking the young people into their family/whānau homes when a young person was evading challenging and risky home environments.

Mel described feeling that no one from her family wanted her. Mel had been moved between multiple family/whānau homes throughout her life and due to her challenging behaviours and lack of suitable caregivers she was placed in a care and protection residence in her early adolescence. Mel said that because no one from her immediate family/whānau offered to care for her when she exited the residence, she moved in with her 18 year old cousin and her

partner when she was thirteen. When this did not work out, Mel was taken in by a friend at school:

*I didn't have nowhere to go, I went to school and that's when my best friend, like I never knew her but the first day I met her she was like "are you okay" and I said nah not really, 'cause I was wagging at the top of the stairs. She was like "what's wrong?" I said I got nowhere to go. She was like come home with me. So I just went home with her. I stayed with her for like 2 years until I met [my partner], and then I started living with them.*

Mel describes becoming part of her friend's family/whānau which highlights the need that many young people like Mel have for connection and stability in a family/whānau environment. In the study, friends like the one Mel describes, often had family/whānau that were willing to take in their children's friends (Urry et al., 2015). The combination of having a supportive friend, whose family/whānau was also supportive, was positive for Mel.

Jenny said that she was easily influenced by her peers, and in her past had ended up in a range of harmful situations. She discusses how access to a supportive friend helped her to change this. Jenny struggled with drug use for several years and a friend played a key role in connecting her to a drug and alcohol treatment programme:

*One of my friends at school told the school counsellor that she was a bit worried about me 'cause I seemed to be, I don't know, drinking or doing drugs or whatever a bit too much. Like she was getting a bit worried. So she talked to the school counsellor about it and he got me into his office and asked me if it was something that I'd want to try (a drug and alcohol treatment programme for youth). And I didn't really know. I didn't really know if I wanted to do it to fix anything but I*



*thought: oh I might as well go and see what it's about - and ended up really liking it.*

Young people who have faced multiple adversities may be drawn into relationships where harmful behaviours are acceptable. Like many youth in the study Jenny was vulnerable to connecting with 'the wrong crowd' when she entered high school (Dewhurst et al., 2014c; Urry et al., 2014). Even though these friendships involved harmful behaviours, they were also paradoxically protective. Jenny's close friends saw that her drug and alcohol use was becoming a problem, and because one of them had a positive experience with a practitioner, they were able to steer her towards seeking help. The importance Jenny placed on her friends, treating them as her close confidantes, may have been why she was open to seeking the support her friend suggested (Kirk, 2002; Sanders et al., 2014a; Schonert-Reichlet & Muller, 1996; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005)

In the next narrative, Nelly describes how her association with a vulnerable peer network led her to reflect on her behaviour and make positive changes. Nelly had experienced challenges in her family/whānau, disengaging from school due to her heavy drug and alcohol use, becoming transient and eventually being picked up by the police and social services due to wellbeing concerns. Nelly engaged in harmful behaviours with her peer group, but this peer group also influenced her to make positive changes; they encouraged her not to follow their path and to make better decisions:

*I've already made my mind up. 'cause like oh the people I was staying with before, some were older and like oh this one fella who was living there he's like done four years in jail and so he's like "no, just sort your shit out". But they like weren't lecturing me they were like – oh we were like all talking about our stories and that "oh yeah I did this and I did that" – and then they were*

*just telling me that like “I’ve been there, I’ve done that”. Like you’ve done heaps of shit but like we’ve had to actually do the time for it and it’s just so not worth it. They were like “you’re so young and like you’ve got a good brain on you and like you know what to do you just don’t do it and like you’re pretty and like you could go far” and stuff like that. “Oh thanks guys”. But like yeah. Because none of my friends had ever really told me “you need to stop this”. But then they did and I was like – it was the first time I’d heard it from people about my own age as well. So I was just like “oh okay”.*

In this study, peer and close friendships were found to play a role in influencing young people’s decisions to change their harmful behaviours (Sanders et al., 2014a; Urry et al., 2015). While it was clear that Nelly’s peers had involved her in risky behaviour, they also encouraged her to leave this group. Through their self-disclosure, Nelly’s peers provided her with information of the kinds of problems, crises, and difficulties other young people were coping with (such as substance abuse and offending). This highlights the learning that peer relationships can offer; the potential of vicarious learning (i.e. efforts to avoid the same mistakes) that also facilitate vulnerable young people’s decisions to exit harmful peer relationships (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005).

Nelly went on to face further challenges due to her offending, however, she made the decision to change her life and re-engage with her education, in part due to her involvement with youth justice services, but also due to her experience with this peer network. The conversations she had with these peers, and the advice they gave, provided additional impetus for her to work towards a positive future self, someone “with a good brain, who knows what to do... who could go far” if she wanted to. Nelly was subsequently connected with an educational provider and drug and alcohol abuse programme as part

of her youth justice intervention and was eventually able to exit her harmful peer relationships.

*Bella had experienced multiple challenges including a violent and volatile relationship with her mother. In the following excerpt she discusses how advice from close friends helped her to manage the difficult relationship she had with her mother:*

*Interviewer: How did you learn to stand up to you mother?*

*Bella: I suppose people like are going “why do you put up with that” “why do you let your mum do that”, I was like “I don’t know” but my friends were kind of telling me why do you put up with the violence. And mum manipulating you. They kind of give me advice, and it is easier talking to them than to like a counsellor because they know-they see how I am during the day but with counsellor you have to go there and explain it all, the (counsellors) expect me to say something and well friends they can just see it.*

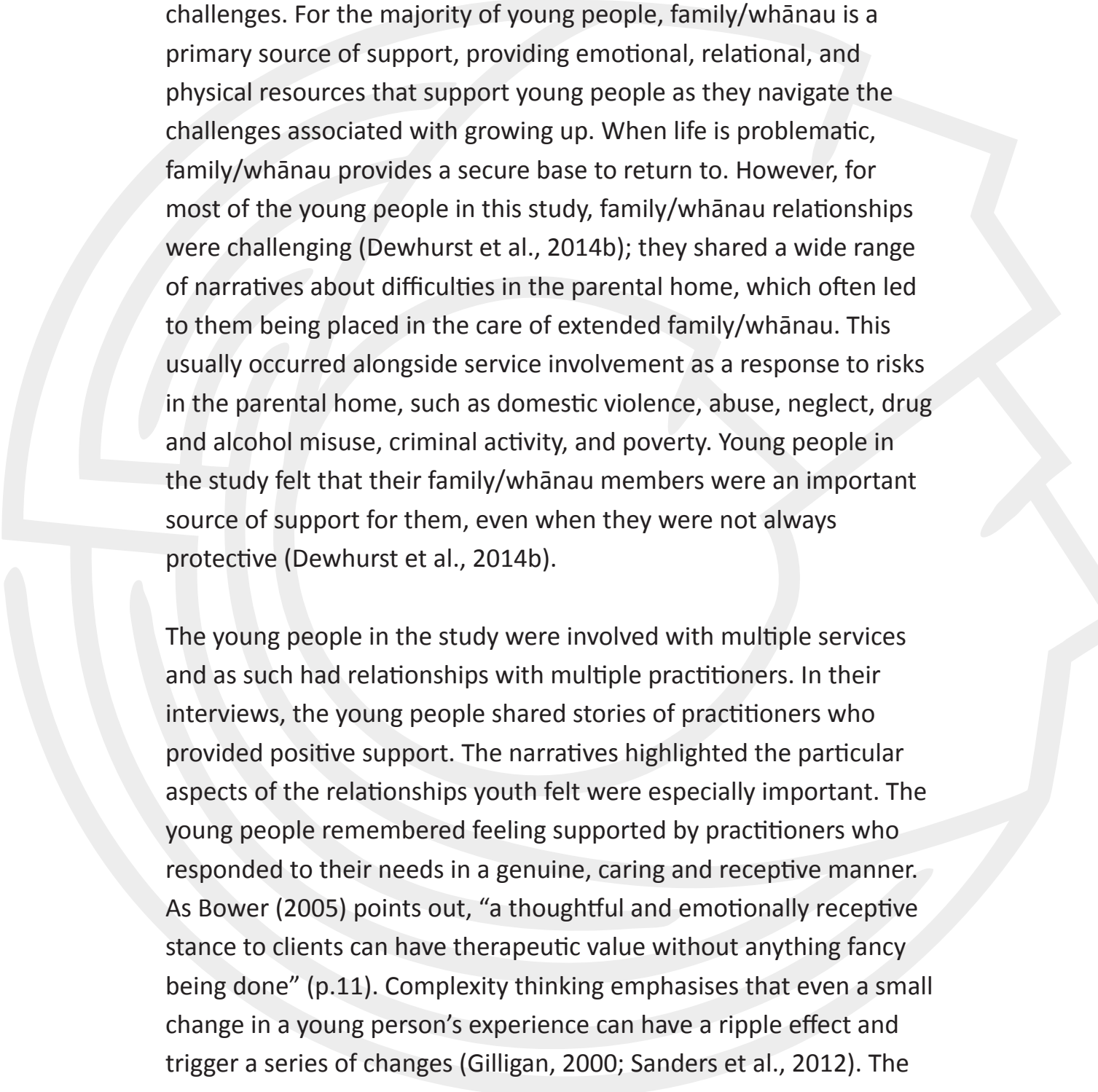
Bella’s primary confidantes were her friends; they already knew her story, so Bella felt safe turning to them for support. Bella’s narrative shows what we know about vulnerable young people’s close friendships; they are key confidantes as they often experience the same level of individual risk as the young person (Sanders et al., 2014a). Bella was reticent to share her story with a counsellor; her friends saw her everyday so could see what was going on for her. While Bella experienced these relationships as supportive, in the study we found that young people’s close friends did not always understand the risks that the young people faced through peer relationships, close friendships and their neighbourhood (Sanders et al., 2014b). Young people’s friends may not recognise that their role as close confidantes could hinder the young person, especially when

the young person could benefit from being connected with a supportive adult (Sanders et al., 2014a).

The support that vulnerable young people experience in their peer relationships reveals that prosocial and varied friendship networks can provide them with resources, such as connections to supportive adults, advice and shelter that assist them as they navigate their adverse circumstances. For several young people in the study, their conflictual family/whānau relationships influenced their reliance on close friends for support. Their peer relationships were experienced as supportive, providing a safe refuge, emotionally as well as physically (through giving advice and being confidantes; living with friends' family/whānau), and were viewed as a positive counterpoint to their troubled family/whānau relationships. For youth involved with harmful peers, these relationships could be supportive (i.e. providing shelter) and were also viewed by youth as positive learning experiences, propelling them into changing their challenging behaviours (i.e. stopping drug use).

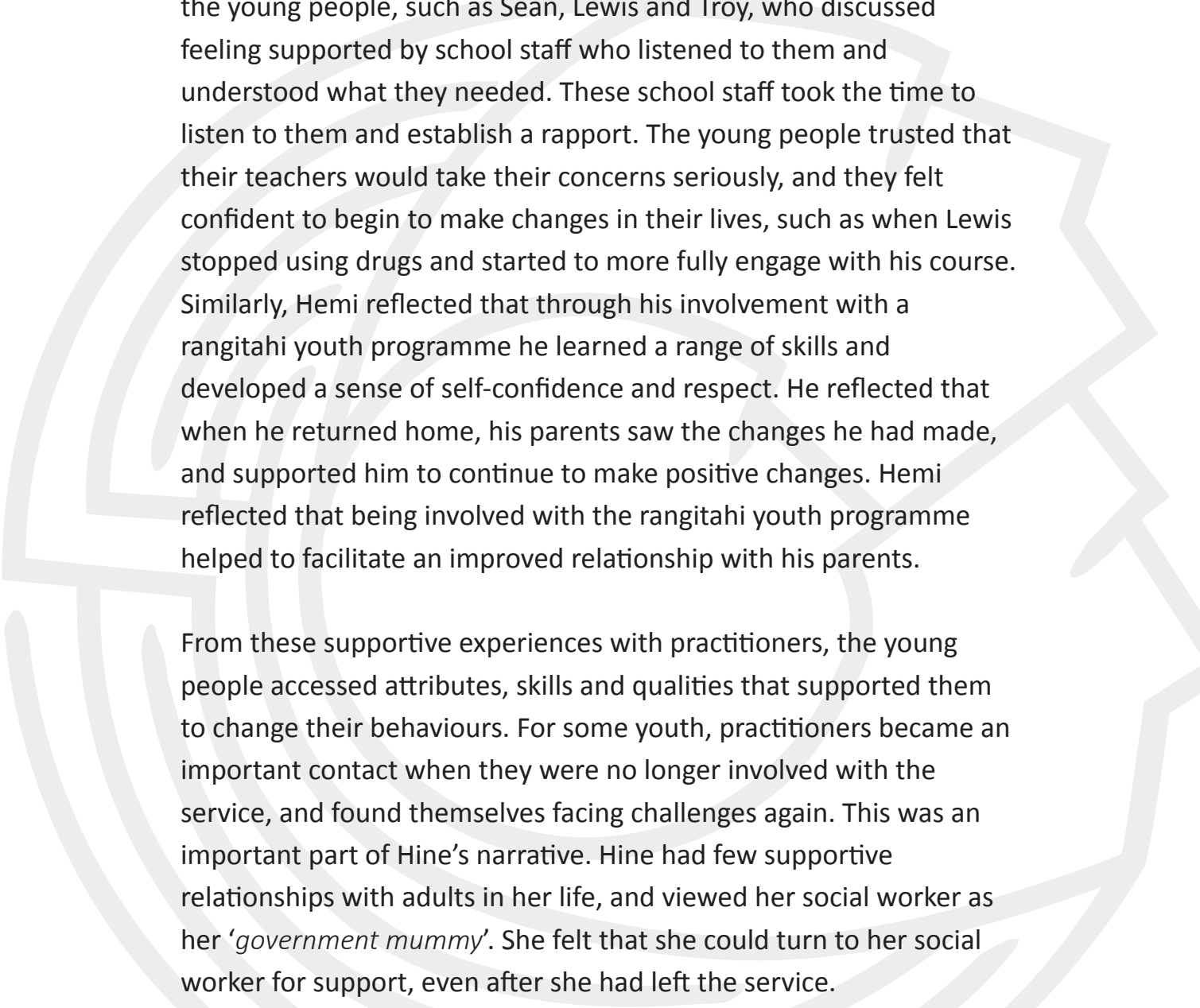
## **DISCUSSION**

The young people in the study experienced a range of positive relationships with family/whānau, service providers, foster carers, community members and friends. These significant others provided support to the young people and helped them to access emotional, relational and physical resources. In their narratives, the young people reflected that they felt cared for, accepted and important, when they had a supportive relationship with an adult or their friends. These relationships provided youth with access to resources such as shelter, food, safety, advice and someone to talk to about the challenges they were facing. They also allowed youth to access interventions and programmes to help them develop skills and confidence.



Some of the young people in the study shared narratives about turning to their family/whānau for support when they faced challenges. For the majority of young people, family/whānau is a primary source of support, providing emotional, relational, and physical resources that support young people as they navigate the challenges associated with growing up. When life is problematic, family/whānau provides a secure base to return to. However, for most of the young people in this study, family/whānau relationships were challenging (Dewhurst et al., 2014b); they shared a wide range of narratives about difficulties in the parental home, which often led to them being placed in the care of extended family/whānau. This usually occurred alongside service involvement as a response to risks in the parental home, such as domestic violence, abuse, neglect, drug and alcohol misuse, criminal activity, and poverty. Young people in the study felt that their family/whānau members were an important source of support for them, even when they were not always protective (Dewhurst et al., 2014b).

The young people in the study were involved with multiple services and as such had relationships with multiple practitioners. In their interviews, the young people shared stories of practitioners who provided positive support. The narratives highlighted the particular aspects of the relationships youth felt were especially important. The young people remembered feeling supported by practitioners who responded to their needs in a genuine, caring and receptive manner. As Bower (2005) points out, “a thoughtful and emotionally receptive stance to clients can have therapeutic value without anything fancy being done” (p.11). 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). The young people in the study describe this ripple effect when practitioners approached them with understanding and genuine regard, providing practical resources such as access to

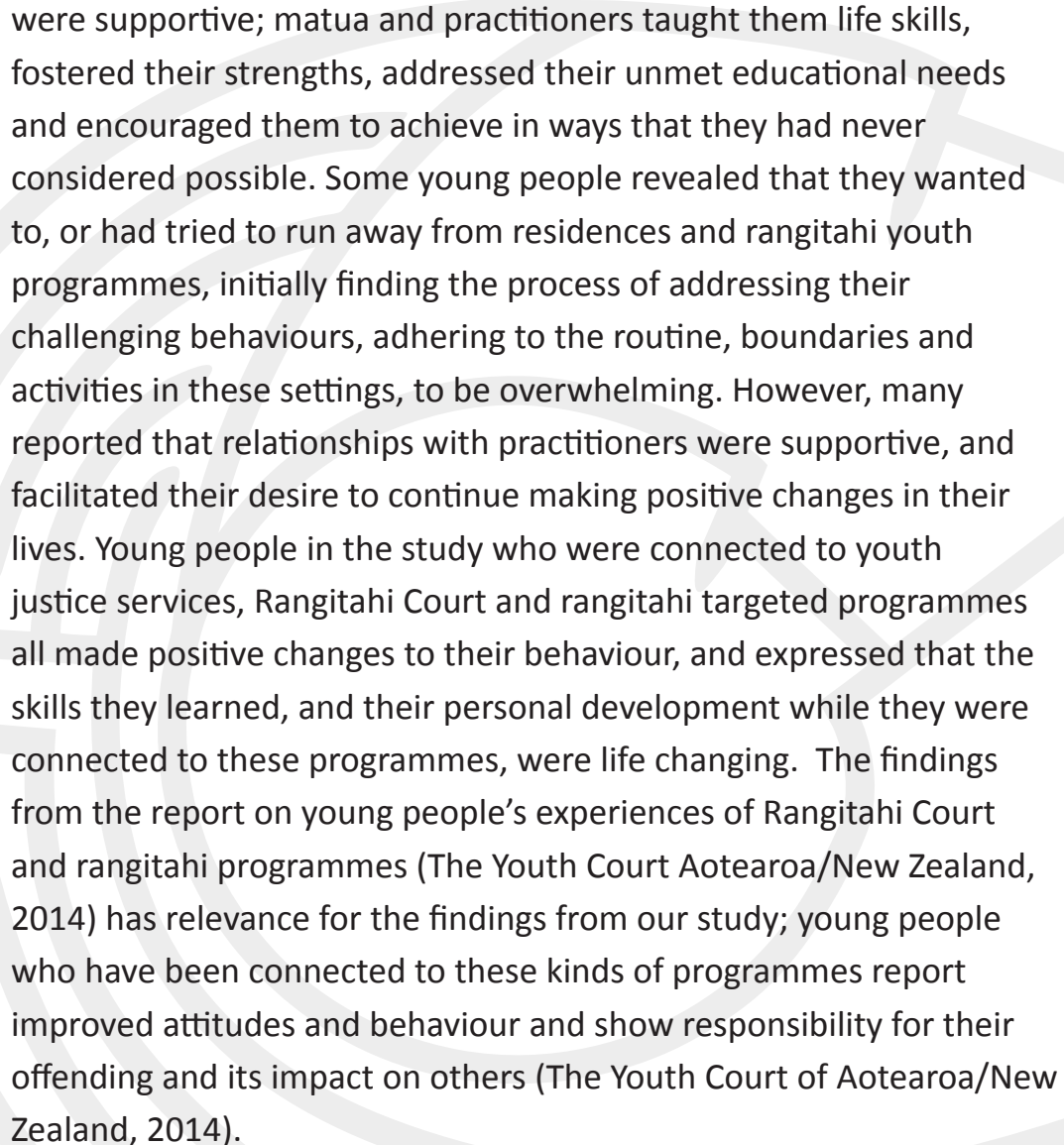


accommodation, courses, funding, and food, as well as emotional and relational resources. This was highlighted in the narratives of many of the young people, such as Sean, Lewis and Troy, who discussed feeling supported by school staff who listened to them and understood what they needed. These school staff took the time to listen to them and establish a rapport. The young people trusted that their teachers would take their concerns seriously, and they felt confident to begin to make changes in their lives, such as when Lewis stopped using drugs and started to more fully engage with his course. Similarly, Hemi reflected that through his involvement with a rangitahi youth programme he learned a range of skills and developed a sense of self-confidence and respect. He reflected that when he returned home, his parents saw the changes he had made, and supported him to continue to make positive changes. Hemi reflected that being involved with the rangitahi youth programme helped to facilitate an improved relationship with his parents.

From these supportive experiences with practitioners, the young people accessed attributes, skills and qualities that supported them to change their behaviours. For some youth, practitioners became an important contact when they were no longer involved with the service, and found themselves facing challenges again. This was an important part of Hine's narrative. Hine had few supportive relationships with adults in her life, and viewed her social worker as her '*government mummy*'. She felt that she could turn to her social worker for support, even after she had left the service.

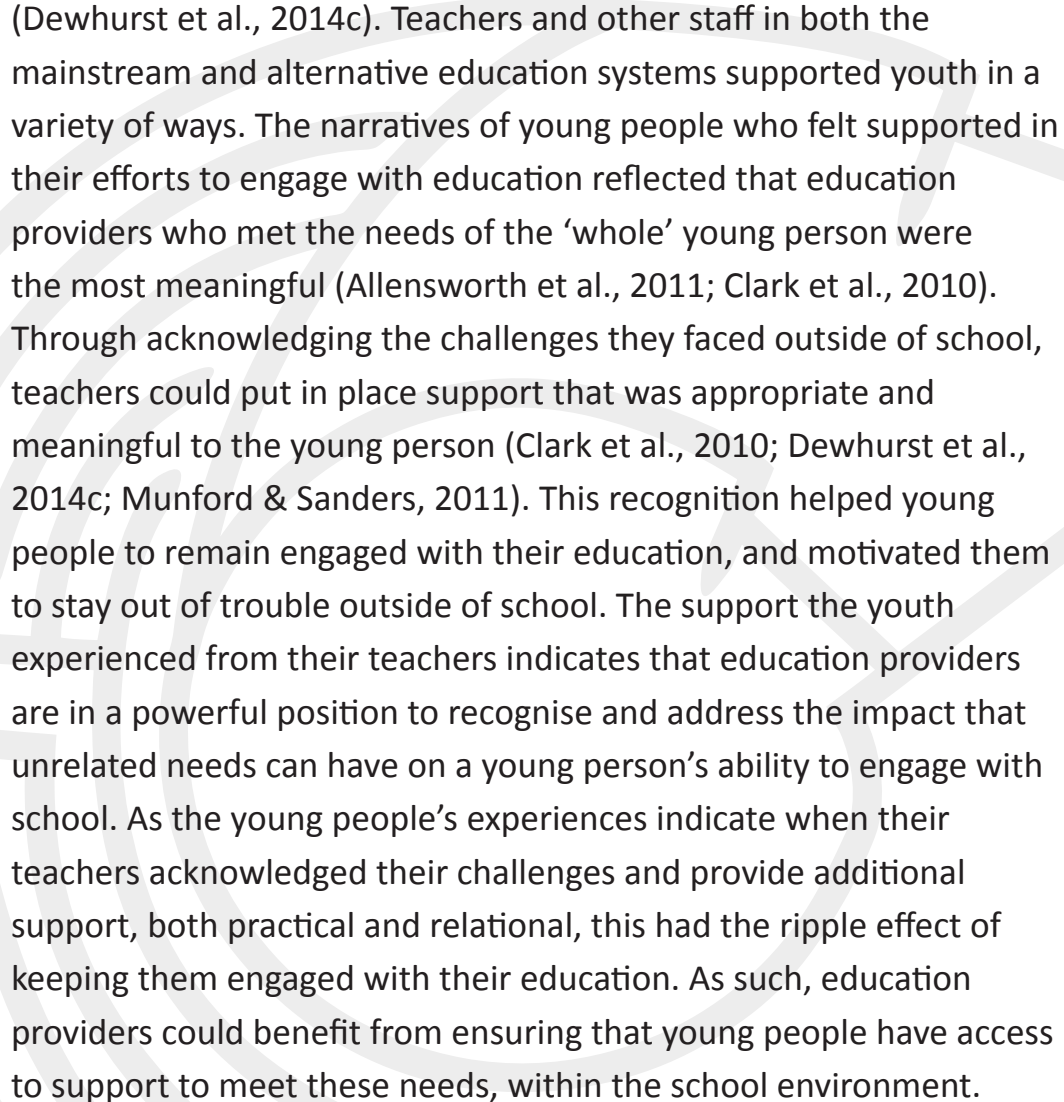
A large number of young people in the study discussed feeling supported through their involvement with youth justice interventions and residential programmes. In addition to taking them out of difficult environments and providing structure, activities and routine, residential settings offered many programmes that addressed unmet educational needs, drug and alcohol use, and





anger issues. Young people said that the relationships they formed with practitioners in youth justice and rangitahi youth programmes were supportive; matua and practitioners taught them life skills, fostered their strengths, addressed their unmet educational needs and encouraged them to achieve in ways that they had never considered possible. Some young people revealed that they wanted to, or had tried to run away from residences and rangitahi youth programmes, initially finding the process of addressing their challenging behaviours, adhering to the routine, boundaries and activities in these settings, to be overwhelming. However, many reported that relationships with practitioners were supportive, and facilitated their desire to continue making positive changes in their lives. Young people in the study who were connected to youth justice services, Rangitahi Court and rangitahi targeted programmes all made positive changes to their behaviour, and expressed that the skills they learned, and their personal development while they were connected to these programmes, were life changing. The findings from the report on young people's experiences of Rangitahi Court and rangitahi programmes (The Youth Court Aotearoa/New Zealand, 2014) has relevance for the findings from our study; young people who have been connected to these kinds of programmes report improved attitudes and behaviour and show responsibility for their offending and its impact on others (The Youth Court of Aotearoa/New Zealand, 2014).

Teachers and other school staff were also important to youth in this study. Vulnerable young people often struggle to find support within the mainstream education system to manage their needs and address issues that they face in their family/whānau and daily lives. The young people who were facing significant challenges in their life outside of school were more likely to focus their attention on managing those challenges rather than on engaging in the classroom (Dewhurst et al., 2014c). For many of the young people, alternative



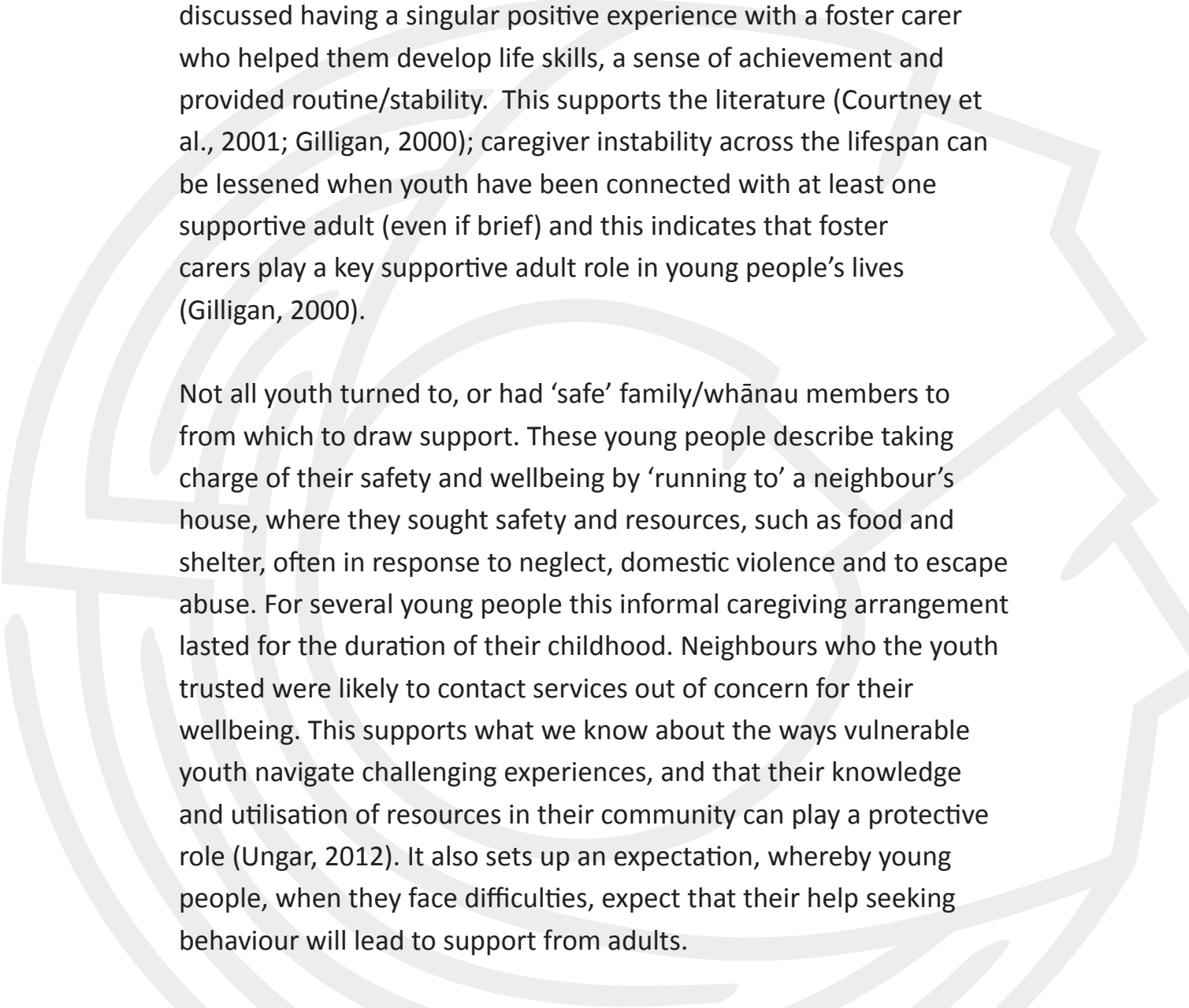
education programmes provided a space where they could engage with education at a level with which they were comfortable (Dewhurst et al., 2014c). Teachers and other staff in both the mainstream and alternative education systems supported youth in a variety of ways. The narratives of young people who felt supported in their efforts to engage with education reflected that education providers who met the needs of the ‘whole’ young person were the most meaningful (Allensworth et al., 2011; Clark et al., 2010). Through acknowledging the challenges they faced outside of school, teachers could put in place support that was appropriate and meaningful to the young person (Clark et al., 2010; Dewhurst et al., 2014c; Munford & Sanders, 2011). This recognition helped young people to remain engaged with their education, and motivated them to stay out of trouble outside of school. The support the youth experienced from their teachers indicates that education providers are in a powerful position to recognise and address the impact that unrelated needs can have on a young person’s ability to engage with school. As the young people’s experiences indicate when their teachers acknowledged their challenges and provide additional support, both practical and relational, this had the ripple effect of keeping them engaged with their education. As such, education providers could benefit from ensuring that young people have access to support to meet these needs, within the school environment.

For young people experiencing mental health issues, seeking help can be a frightening prospect. Many may have faced stigma from their family/whānau, peers and wider community, and may be reluctant to seek professional support (Bulanda et al., 2014; Jivanjee & Kruzich, 2011). For the young people in the study, having a supportive relationship with mental health service providers helped them to make positive changes in their lives. They reflected in their interviews that mental health practitioners made them feel cared for, ‘*like family*’ in their interactions with youth. This was important, especially

as the young people were often unsure of what to expect from their involvement with mental health services. Knowing that practitioners would support youth helped them feel confident to make changes in their lives. As Jane pointed out, she felt she could be honest with her service provider about her drug use as she knew her provider wanted to help her.

The young people's narratives indicated that when family/whānau worked with services and youth to address their challenges, they experienced improved relationships with their parents and were motivated to make positive changes to their behaviour. Young people were more likely to engage with interventions, education, and services, when their family/whānau were supporting them in this process. Furthermore, the young people involved in youth justice services described being supported to change their behaviours, address the causes of their offending, and re-engage with their education when their family/whānau, victims of their offending, and practitioners all worked together to help them address their offending (Dewhurst et al., 2014b; Urry et al., 2014; The Youth Court of New Zealand, 2014).

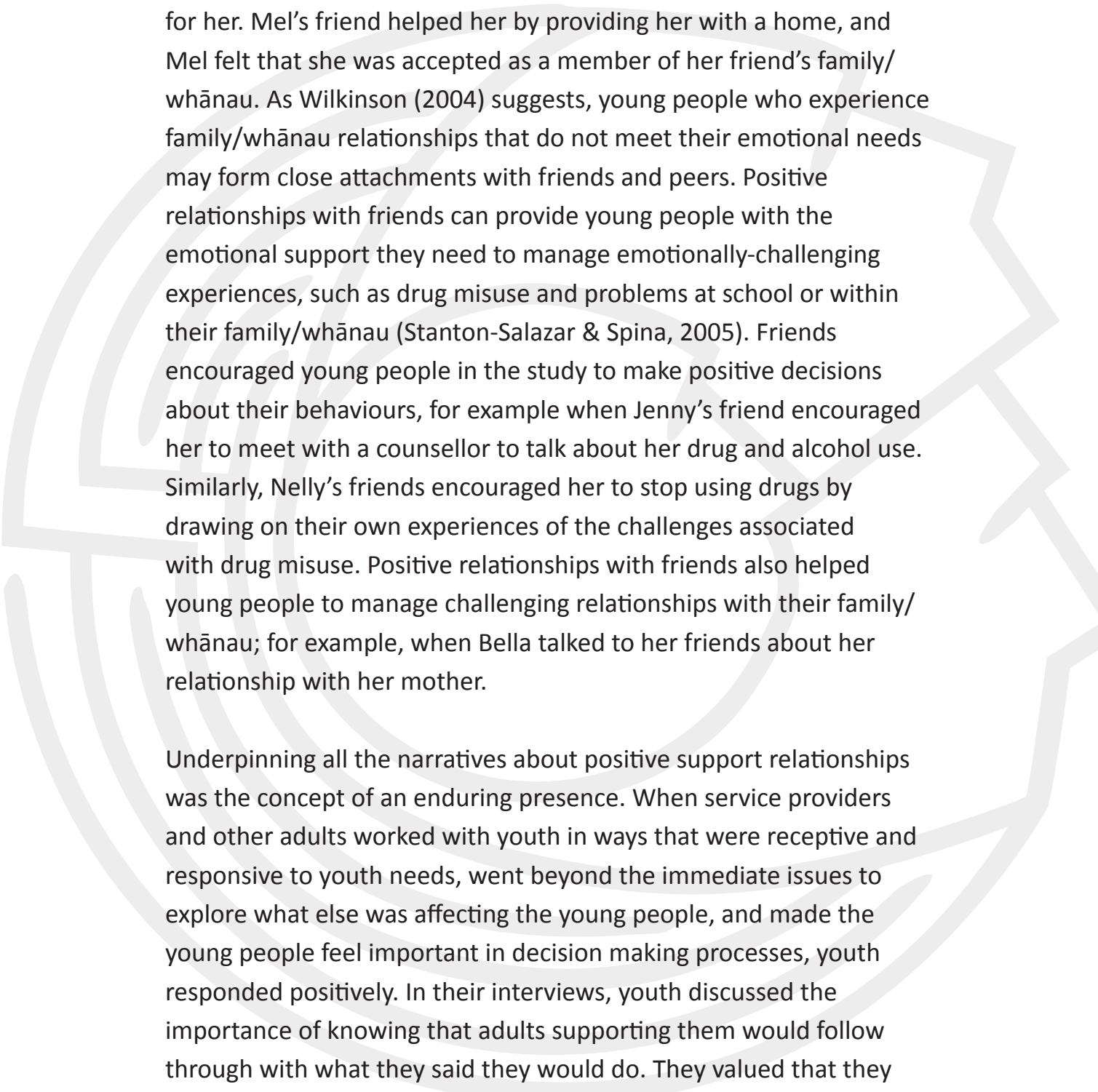
Young people also reported on their positive experiences in foster care. Key factors that contributed to positive foster care experiences included: the quality of their relationships with a foster carer, reflected in skill based learning and activities, boundaries, emotional receptivity and a foster parent being an enduring presence in their lives (Munford and Sanders, 2014). In the study, several young people who appraised foster carers as supportive had been in foster care for up to five years; in such instances the foster carers remained connected with the young person when their caregiving arrangements changed. This suggests that young people find the stability of longer term foster care beneficial. However, many young people in the study experienced a large number of changes in foster



carers and family/whānau care, often due to returning home and requiring on-going service involvement. Some of these young people discussed having a singular positive experience with a foster carer who helped them develop life skills, a sense of achievement and provided routine/stability. This supports the literature (Courtney et al., 2001; Gilligan, 2000); caregiver instability across the lifespan can be lessened when youth have been connected with at least one supportive adult (even if brief) and this indicates that foster carers play a key supportive adult role in young people's lives (Gilligan, 2000).

Not all youth turned to, or had 'safe' family/whānau members to from which to draw support. These young people describe taking charge of their safety and wellbeing by 'running to' a neighbour's house, where they sought safety and resources, such as food and shelter, often in response to neglect, domestic violence and to escape abuse. For several young people this informal caregiving arrangement lasted for the duration of their childhood. Neighbours who the youth trusted were likely to contact services out of concern for their wellbeing. This supports what we know about the ways vulnerable youth navigate challenging experiences, and that their knowledge and utilisation of resources in their community can play a protective role (Ungar, 2012). It also sets up an expectation, whereby young people, when they face difficulties, expect that their help seeking behaviour will lead to support from adults.

For the young people in the study, friends and peers were often a valuable source of support. Friends acted as confidantes, helped the young people access resources, such as shelter and food, to meet their needs, and supported the young people to address some of the challenges in their lives, for example their drug use. Some of the young people in the study formed close attachments with their friends, relying on friends to help them make sense of their



experiences and meet their basic needs. For example, Mel turned to a friend when she felt that no one in her family/whānau could care for her. Mel's friend helped her by providing her with a home, and Mel felt that she was accepted as a member of her friend's family/whānau. As Wilkinson (2004) suggests, young people who experience family/whānau relationships that do not meet their emotional needs may form close attachments with friends and peers. Positive relationships with friends can provide young people with the emotional support they need to manage emotionally-challenging experiences, such as drug misuse and problems at school or within their family/whānau (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005). Friends encouraged young people in the study to make positive decisions about their behaviours, for example when Jenny's friend encouraged her to meet with a counsellor to talk about her drug and alcohol use. Similarly, Nelly's friends encouraged her to stop using drugs by drawing on their own experiences of the challenges associated with drug misuse. Positive relationships with friends also helped young people to manage challenging relationships with their family/whānau; for example, when Bella talked to her friends about her relationship with her mother.

Underpinning all the narratives about positive support relationships was the concept of an enduring presence. When service providers and other adults worked with youth in ways that were receptive and responsive to youth needs, went beyond the immediate issues to explore what else was affecting the young people, and made the young people feel important in decision making processes, youth responded positively. In their interviews, youth discussed the importance of knowing that adults supporting them would follow through with what they said they would do. They valued that they were important to the adults in their lives. Having a supportive relationship with an adult who was not a part of their family/whānau gave youth opportunities to experiment with social relationships,

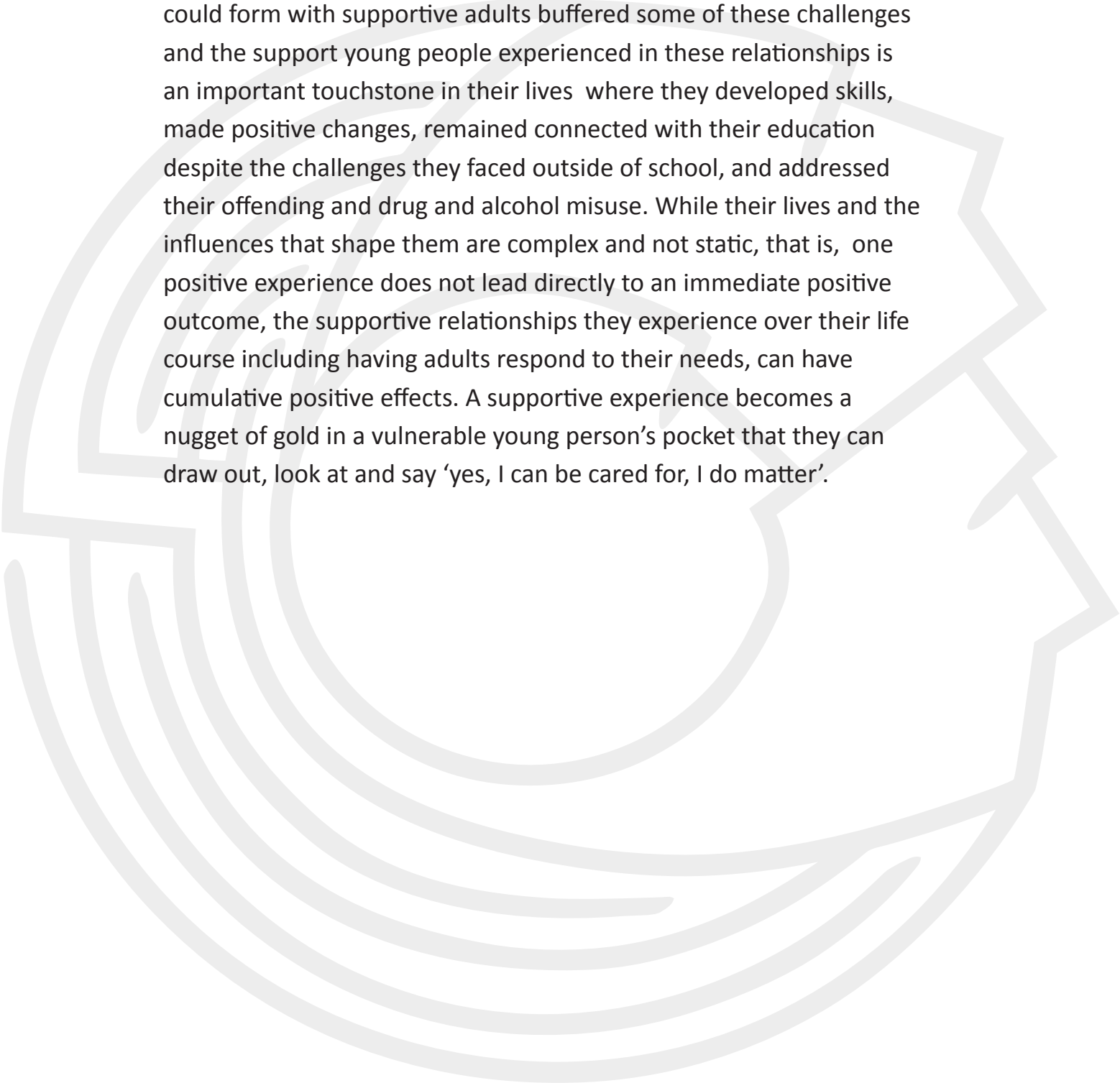
build new skills (for instance, through youth development and alternative education programmes), and develop a sense of self-confidence and identity (Munford & Sanders, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

This report highlights that positive relationships with family/whānau, service providers, foster carers, neighbours and friends enabled youth to find meaningful support. Relationships with practitioners supplemented support from immediate and extended family/whānau and at times took over key support roles for these vulnerable youth. The analysis of young people's relationships with practitioners indicated quite clearly that they play a central role in supporting young people as they navigate changes in their circumstances, address their offending and meet their caregiving needs. Practitioners who made a difference formed genuine and trusting relationships with youth, taking the time to listen to them and understand the ways that their experiences influenced their challenges and behaviour. The young people discussed feeling supported by practitioners who were willing to 'go the extra mile'. Teachers in both mainstream and alternative education play valuable roles in recognising and responding to the challenges that impacted on young people's engagement with their education.

The support youth experienced in their peer relationships and with people in their community, such as neighbours, was often in response to challenges in the family/whānau. Often their informal help-seeking brought about involvement with services, in particular when their friends had positive experiences with practitioners and/or encouraged the young people to seek help. Peers were also a source of vicarious learning for vulnerable youth, acting supportively by encouraging them not to make the same mistakes as them (i.e. drug addiction/ ongoing criminal justice involvement).





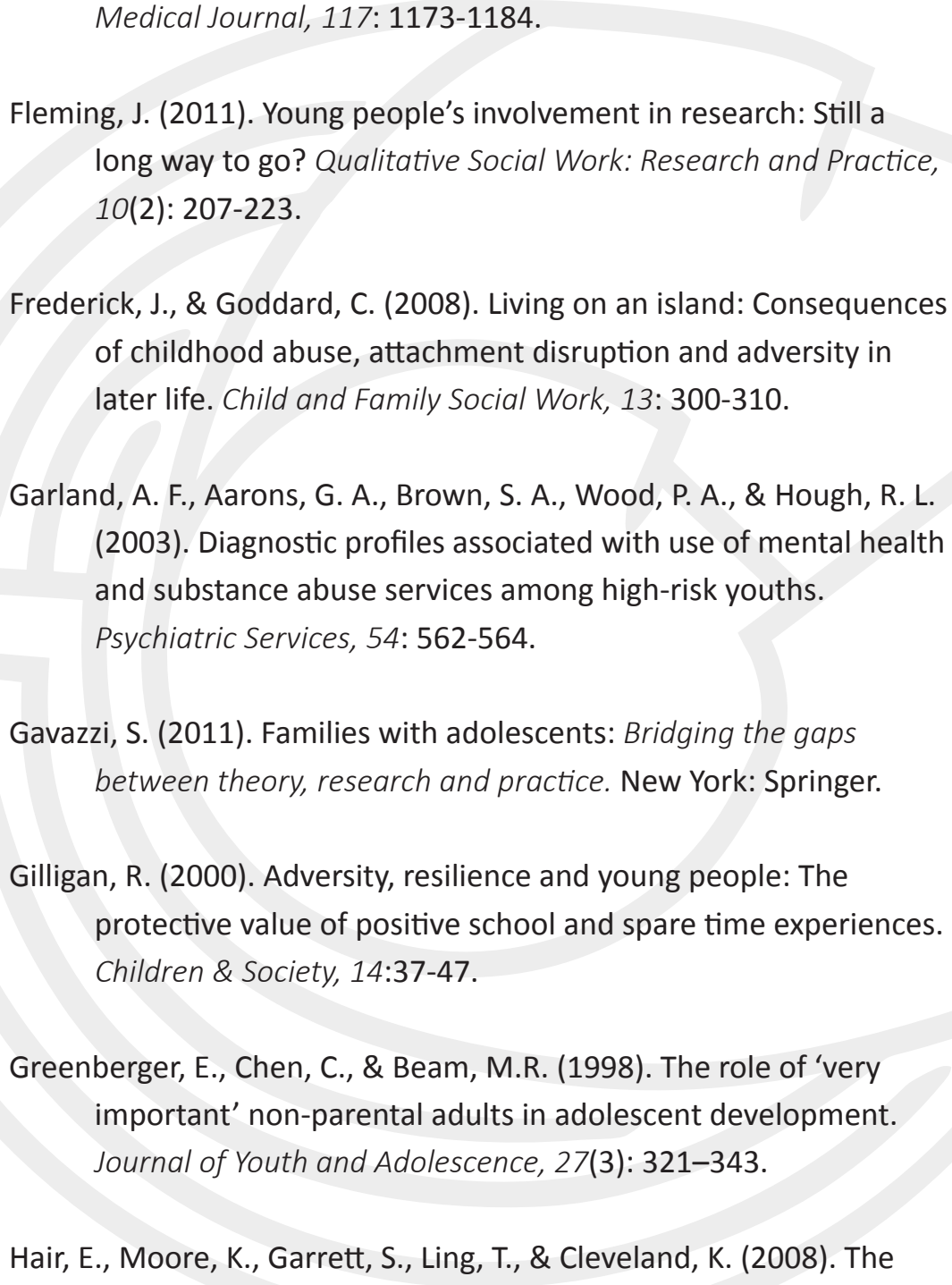
Disrupted and challenging family/whānau relationships were a feature of the lives of many youth in this study. The relationships they could form with supportive adults buffered some of these challenges and the support young people experienced in these relationships is an important touchstone in their lives where they developed skills, made positive changes, remained connected with their education despite the challenges they faced outside of school, and addressed their offending and drug and alcohol misuse. While their lives and the influences that shape them are complex and not static, that is, one positive experience does not lead directly to an immediate positive outcome, the supportive relationships they experience over their life course including having adults respond to their needs, can have cumulative positive effects. A supportive experience becomes a nugget of gold in a vulnerable young person's pocket that they can draw out, look at and say 'yes, I can be cared for, I do matter'.

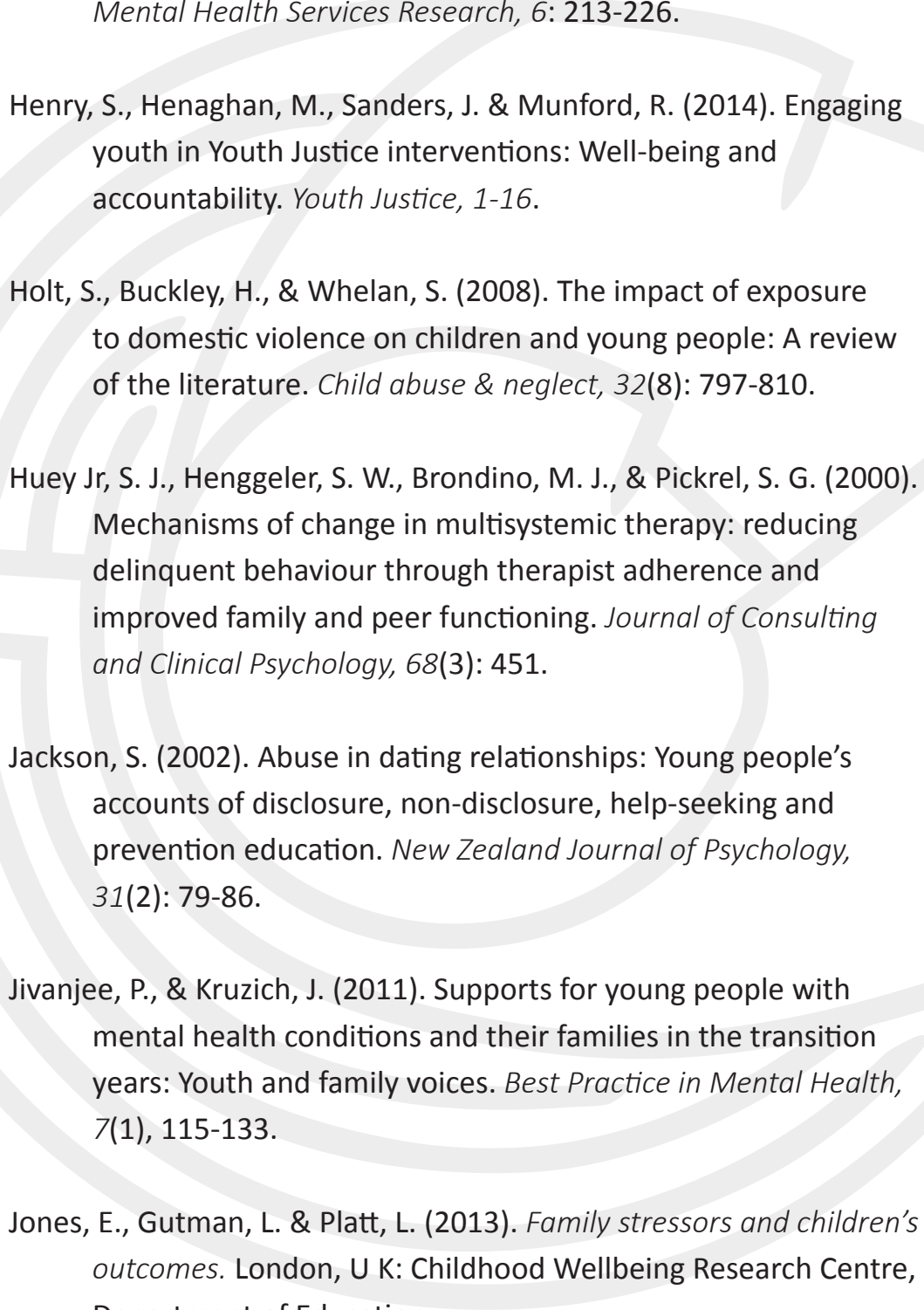
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