

The Youth Transitions Study (New Zealand):

*Whāia to huanui kia toa*

# Magic People

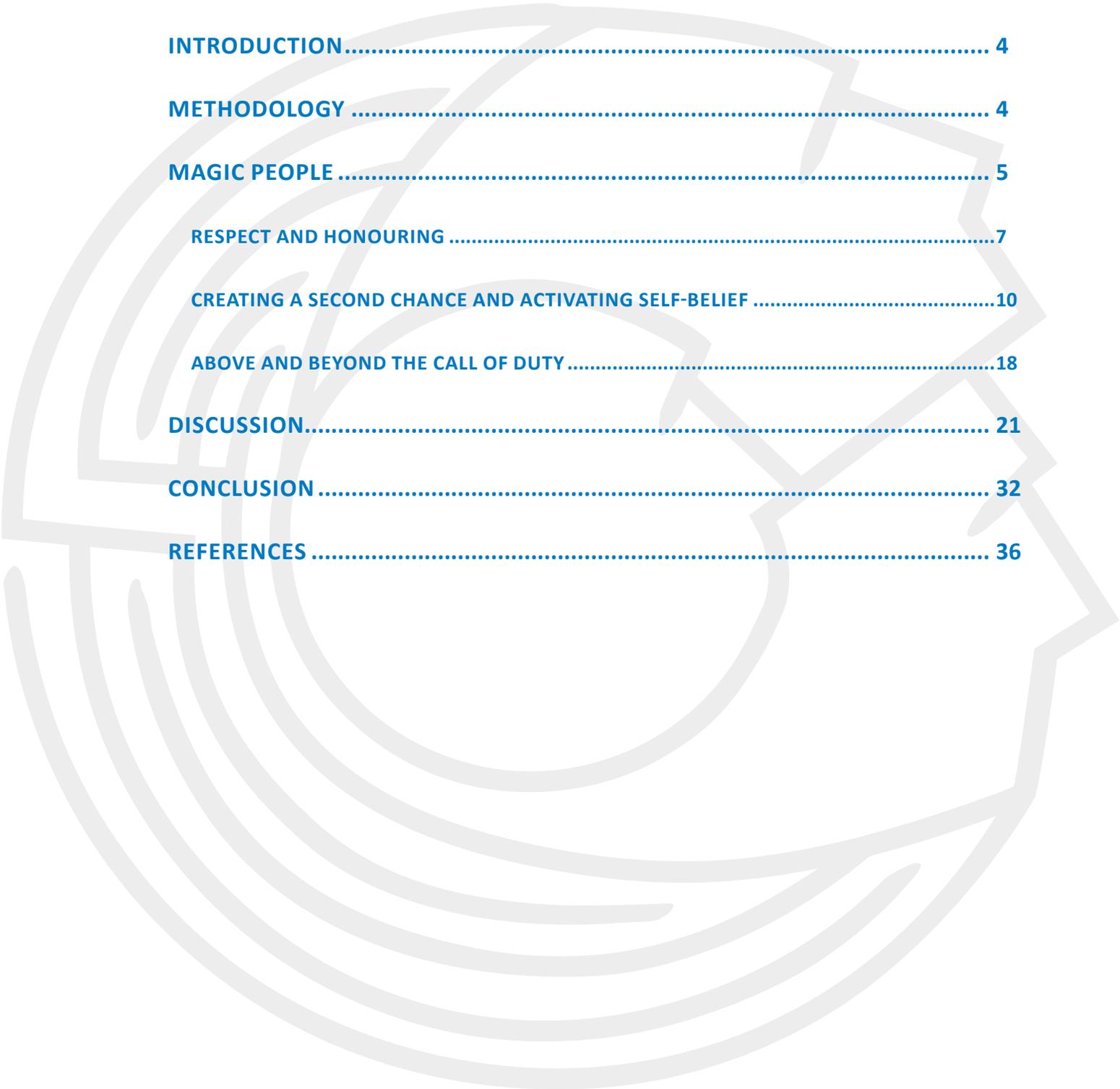
## Technical Report 31

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## Introduction

The Youth Transitions Study is a longitudinal study of the transition to adulthood for young people who face high levels of risk during childhood and adolescence. The research was funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment between 2009 and 2019. In addition to tracking the transition process across time, the study also investigated the role of services and informal networks in supporting these transitions.

This report draws on the qualitative interviews and reports on one theme that emerged in the data analysis: young people's accounts of their relationships with magic people. These relationships held transformative potential.

## Methodology

The research programme involved:

- A survey administered to young people once a year for three years.
- Qualitative interviews with a subset of young people administered once a year for three years after completion of the three surveys.
- Qualitative interviews with an adult nominated by the young people as someone they trusted and whom they considered knew the most about them (Person Most Knowledgeable (PMK)).

In 2009, 593 young people were recruited into the study. The study began with three annual surveys. Following this, a subset of 107 youth were recruited into the qualitative phase and participated in three qualitative interviews. The research was approved by the

University Ethics Committee. Both surveys and interviews were administered by trained interviewers. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the qualitative interviews. These interviews included a range of questions covering life experiences, risks and resources, experiences of family, school, work and service experiences, community, relationships, and the young person's insights into what assisted them through their transitions. The young people were interviewed individually in a location of their choosing. The PMK also participated in three rounds of qualitative interviews. Interviews were recorded digitally, transcribed verbatim, and coded using NVivo qualitative software. An initial set of thematic nodes was derived from the qualitative interviews and then a secondary analysis generated other themes that either added conceptual depth to those themes or added new conceptual categories. This report focuses on one of these themes: magic people – people whose presence in young people's lives held transformative potential, particularly in relation to creating the conditions under which youth gained the confidence to re-engage with education or to try again to find work. It draws on data from the qualitative interviews with young people, and corresponding interviews with their PMK, where nominated.

## **Magic People**

This report explores the idea of a magic person: a person whose presence in the young person's life held transformative potential. Previous reports have explored a range of relationships and the roles they have played either in creating opportunities for the young person to navigate towards better outcomes, or in reinforcing downward spirals (see, for example, Alessi et al., 2018a). Given the importance of education and employment to better outcomes for youth, this report focuses specifically on the ways in which magic people opened up possibilities for youth to reconsider the role that education and employment could play in their lives as vehicles for

positive change. In the context of this report, magic people were special individuals whose presence had a significant impact on the way the young person thought about the relevance of education to them and/or their employment prospects. The report examines what it was about these individuals that made them magic. It considers three dimensions: respect and honouring; creating a second chance and activating self-belief; and being willing to go above and beyond the call of duty.

The three key dimensions can be thought of as a continuum from relatively simple acts of human kindness (respect and honouring) to creating opportunities for the young person to make change and in this process encouraging self-belief which provided a foundation for ongoing change (creating a second chance and activating self-belief), right through to courageous acts of support reflected in a willingness to support the young person when others had given up (being willing to go above and beyond the call of duty). First, a respectful and honouring orientation to the young person, often seen in simple acts of kindness, created a relational space where young people felt sufficiently safe to begin to be open to re-engaging with education or to try again to find work after many rejections. Second, adults had magic qualities when they gave a young person another chance to try again with education or provided active support to them as they again faced the risks of rejection and sought work. In doing this, they used their position of authority to support the young person to believe in their own abilities to take steps towards change. Finally, magic was created when adults took an expansive approach to their involvement with young people. This typically involved doing more than their job, or taking a risk or a chance with young people by advocating for them with schools or by actively connecting them with employers despite their less than ideal work histories. This often meant stretching professional boundaries, including things such as providing them with a place to stay so they could complete their

schooling. Magic people created the circumstances where the young person gained the confidence to return to education or to try again to find work. Magic people could be professionals (such as teachers, tutors, social workers, counsellors, and youth workers), kin (including siblings, parents, grandparents, partners and children) or friends of the young person. In terms of reconnecting with education, magic people were predominantly educational professionals, in relation to employment, kin and friends more often played the magic role. The remainder of this report explores the three dimensions that characterised magic people.

### **Respect and honouring**

Sometimes what made a person magic was the fact that they were the opposite of what the young person had come to expect from adults. For example, where the young person had experienced a consistent lack of respect from teachers, a teacher who showed them respect could have a big impact. Often it was as simple as being treated with kindness. Koa's experiences reflected this type of magic. She was in prison in the first interview and expressed a lot of distress when talking about friends and family who had promised her that they would stay in contact while she served her sentence; none of whom kept their word. Even her best friend, who had also been in prison, had not been in touch after being released, leaving Koa feeling let down and abandoned by the people she had relied on.

Alongside these experiences of abandonment by the people closest to her, Koa had also lost confidence in professional support. In disclosing abuse to the child protection service Koa had unintentionally set off a cycle of unpredictable and distressing interactions with investigators, none of whom provided her with the promised support to deal with the consequences of the abuse. Rather, intermittent and unpredictable re-contacting by

professionals was experienced as people invading her life to dredge up painful memories before simply disappearing again. This served only to re-traumatise her.

In contrast, she had a tutor and a bible studies teacher both of whom visited her every week in prison. The fact that they were reliable and kept their word was clearly extremely important to her, and as a result, both had a significant impact on her. Her tutor had stopped visiting in the second interview because she had moved from a high to low security wing in the prison, but she was still having regular visits from the same bible studies teacher and enjoying the chance to keep talking to her. Koa talked of the value she gained from this reliable contact and the benefits of being listened to respectfully and taken seriously. The support enabled her to start to imagine making a new life for herself when released from prison.

Arthur, Tane, and Koa all appreciated a magic person who was simply nice to them, who took an interest in their difficulties and who treated them well. Arthur talked about problems with teachers in the past, including one who had hit him when he was only eleven years old. As a result, he had trouble trusting any teachers, especially those who were male, but a teacher who had a big impact on him afterwards was a female teacher who was polite to him and offered him fruit at lunchtime. This small act of kindness made his life feel easier and left a big impression on him. It made him want to continue engaging with education.

Being treated with respect was profoundly important to the young people. Joey talked about how he repeatedly got into trouble for fighting, and the special education teacher at his school would talk to him about his problems. Joey felt that being treated like a person, rather than being analysed, was an extremely important part of their interactions and the impression the teacher left on him. He even

went so far as to say “*he treated me like a bloody human being which was hard to come by back then*”.

Feeling that an adult was able to relate to them or their experiences made it a lot easier to build trust and this gave the relationship a lot more weight. Being able to relate to the young person could come from having had a similar life or similar experiences, being of the same ethnicity, and sometimes being related to the young person. An important feature of all of these relationships was that people took the time to listen and learn how the young person experienced their life.

Ria’s uncle was her maths teacher for a while, and she felt that he helped her get a handle on the subject by trying to stop her from getting bored. In her case using amounts of alcohol as examples in questions made the lessons more fun, while using shared jokes kept her engaged with her lessons and helped her feel that she belonged in the classroom.

Ariki talked about how it helped him to have teachers whom he felt understood his experiences, saying “*the best teachers I had. ‘Cause they understood us, what we were going through and shit*”. Matiu had a similar experience with a science teacher whom he felt knew what he was going through even though he was not sure how the teacher came by this understanding. He said that she “*understood... the troubles I was going through... she knew... what it was like. ... and she understood how it was. ... She never told me how she understood, but I just knew that she knew*”. He said that she always checked in with him, asked how he was, and made sure that he completed his schoolwork. When she was present he enjoyed going to class. This connection made it possible for him to feel safe at school.

Emeré’s magic person was a tutor who he described as “*like another*

*dad to us*". This tutor, she said, would look out for all the students when they were having trouble. He also helped them with extra-curricular tasks such as filling in the forms for and paying camp fees. Isaac had a positive experience when he was a young teenager of a tutor who did more than simply tell him that relying on crime for money was wrong. Rather than just telling him crime was wrong, the tutor encouraged him to look at the people around him who lived on the proceeds of crime and to think carefully about what he wanted from his life. By being somebody who was understanding and relatable and suggesting that he look at the consequences on the lives of the people he may have been unconsciously emulating, Isaac was able to break out of the narrative he constructed about himself and to find new ways forward. In the second round of interviews, Isaac's PMK talked about how having a child had provided a positive impetus for him to look for legitimate work.

### **Creating a second chance and activating self-belief**

Tamati was inspired to work harder by his magic person, a tutor, when that tutor gave him a second chance (see also, Alessi et al., 2018a; Johnston et al., 2018). From this act Tamati learned that he was valued and the result was that Tamati felt like *"I want to keep going to show my tutor the appreciation that he's given us another chance"*. The tutor helped him get a job, and the effect on his self-esteem of somebody seeing him as worth the effort was apparent in the first interview when he said *"[the tutor] showed me that if I push myself I can get to where I want to get"*. Being valued and believed in was a novel experience for Tamati and it enabled him to start to believe in himself and his capacity to create a more positive future.

Ruby recalled a teacher she had at intermediate school, who she described as *"the best teacher I have ever had in my life"*. The biggest thing for her was the fact that he seemed to believe in her

and had an interest in pushing her to continually strive to do better at school even when she experienced setbacks. She said that *“he just really challenged me and drove me to be the best that I could be all the time [he has been] so supportive of me, and like, it was like he’d seen something [in me] that I didn’t see”*. Tragically, the thing that made him have such a big impact on her life was the fact that apparently he alone saw her potential and considered it worthwhile putting effort into supporting her. She talked about how important he had been to her and how much just believing in her had meant to her because it enabled her to believe in herself.

Meily had two magic people who supported her to keep engaged with her education. Both a tutor and course mate had helped her by pushing her and encouraging her to keep attending. The course mate she described as nice and helpful, and who regularly checked up on her to make sure she was attending her course. Her tutor made a point of recognising her and calling her out when she missed course days, but in a friendly manner that did not make her want to avoid him. He also made things easier for her to understand, and when she had problems he would take the time to phrase things for her in a way that made it easier for her to follow and keep up with classes.

Ari’s story provides a powerful example of the influence a magic person can have. At all three interviews Ari talked about the positive influence of his nan on him. His nan had been consistently present for him across his years. She had supported him when he was in trouble, and always encouraged him to do better for himself. In the first interview he talked about the advice he got from his nan, but he was still having ongoing troubles with the law and seemed to have difficulty putting into action the changes that he wanted.

In the second interview however, he spoke about how his nan had died, and the profound impact this had on him. While her physical

presence had been valuable to him in the past, her death was what really encouraged him to put a concerted effort into leaving his offending behind him. In the second interview, he was working and keeping away from offending, a trend that he carried through into the third round.

Ari also provided one of the few examples of a young person using their own momentum to shift the values and behaviours of a negative peer group. While ordinarily, negative peer groups were a risk factor, providing repeated social encouragement to young people to return to the offending-based lifestyles they were trying to leave behind, when Ari found his positive momentum he used his personal sway in the social group to bring some of his peers with him. He encouraged them to move away from offending and in doing this became a magic person himself for others:

*...just, my nan passed and she was the most important thing in my life. And from there I just, grew-up... I got sick of living, you know getting caught up in crime, getting caught up in all the dumb stuff that I used to do. So I just decided to make a change, 'cause I had a big group, and I was one of the main fulla's and so I decided to make a change and from that everybody else followed. When my nan was here you know, I was putting her- I was going through some dumb stuff and she had to come and support me. You know as a young person you don't want your nan, to have to come to court cases and everything, you don't want them to see all that. See all the cops come over home, so I got sick of it but it had to take my nan to pass for me to finally wake up. So I had to make a move, so I made a move.*

Later in the interview Ari talked about how proud he was of the change he had made and how good it made him feel to be able to buy and legally own things instead of stealing them. He also talked

about how his older cousins, who had been negative role models in terms of encouraging crime at the time of the first interview, were now supporting him to improve his life, find work, and follow his nan's advice, rather than see him go down the path they had followed.

In the third interview, Ari was working full-time and also had a part-time job, earning money to support his whānau. In particular, he wanted to provide a good life for a younger brother who was starting to offend. He felt strongly that as somebody who had been involved with offending he had particular insights to offer and hoped that his example could persuade his brother to do better by showing him the pathway to proper employment and a life less on-the-edge. He had also given jobs to a significant number of his previous peer group, some of whom were working hard and providing for their own whānau/families.

Tangaroa also had a whānau member as a magic person who inspired him to believe in himself. He had been involved in offending when he was younger and as a result of this his mother sent him to live with his uncle who was stricter on him. His uncle encouraged Tangaroa to think about where he was going with his life, and this reflection was what started his desire to live and work legally. He planned to do warehousing and retailing in the future, and was hoping that at some stage he would be able to move to Australia to work with his uncle.

In the second interview, he was completing a training course towards warehousing which was a job he hoped to get to help support his pregnant partner. In the third interview, he was still in a relationship with the same partner and he had only recently found his way into work in construction, which he was enjoying.

As noted above, Tamati's magic person was his tutor. He had gone to

the course to get his forklift license, and when he was finished, the tutor gave him a good reference and recommended him for a job, for which he was accepted. When talking about how he had kept the job and how hard he was working, he said:

*[the tutor] saw that we needed another chance that nobody else would give us, yeah, I just took the chance as it came, made something out of it, and it got me to where I am today. And now, I want to keep going to show my tutor the appreciation that he's given us another chance.*

His impression of the tutor was that he was passionate and driven, but also that he clearly had a desire to prove to the young people that he was working with that they were worth the effort.

Unfortunately, in the second interview Tamati had been let go from his job as it was only seasonal. As a result of this he refused to accept jobs that he felt would only let him work for the 90-day trial period or that were temporary. The uncertainty and instability of these arrangements caused him too much anxiety. This meant that at the time of the second interview he was living with his partner and relying on a benefit, which he was ashamed of, and struggling to find secure employment. His situation had deteriorated by the third interview. He had broken up with his partner, was still relying on a benefit for income, and he was also restricted in the work he could apply for by bail conditions as a result of his offending.

Mikaere also had trouble keeping work and staying away from trouble. During his second interview he mentioned how his sister had tried to help him to do better by encouraging him, but he felt that it was having his daughter that had the greatest impact on him. When he was asked if he spent much time with his previous friend group who tended to get into trouble, he said “*[s]ince I had my daughter,*

*nah. I just stopped all of that stuff, and that's when I started trying to get a job and stuff."* He was contributing money to his ex-partner every week and travelling across town to visit her almost every day. His situation was similar in the third interview, although with some added difficulties. He was working full-time rather than temping, which was something he had been aiming to achieve. He was still contributing a lot of money towards his daughter, which did not leave him with much money for his own needs. He had also moved out of his sister's house and across the city to be closer to his daughter. This unfortunately had several negative consequences for him. Being closer to his daughter had put him further away from work, and being away from his sister, who was his main mode of transport to work, had resulted in him being caught driving while disqualified several times. At the time of the interview, he was waiting on a court decision to see if he would be sent to prison.

Niuhaus explained in his first interview that his perspective on getting into trouble and earning money illegally changed when he was involved in a major violent incident. He spoke of how several other people had been involved in similar incidents on the same night and he was the only one who had survived. As a result of this, at the first interview he was working full-time and living with his partner. This continued at the second interview and in the third Niuhaus talked about how his wife and daughters played a pivotal role in his desire to move away from making a living from crime. When Niuhaus told his friends and gang associates that he wanted to move away from illegal earning so he would be better able to provide for his partner and children, he found that they supported and assisted his transition. He explained that sometimes they even financially supported him without involving him in illegal activity, respecting his desire to live crime-free. He also talked about how he really enjoyed his previous job but that it had barely paid enough to cover bills. Not being able to provide extras for his children pushed him to look for a job that he enjoyed less but which was better paid, allowing him to feel like he was properly providing.

Tai was already working, although less than full-time, when he met his

partner, who became a magic person for him. She was working full-time and seemed to be happy to help him cover bills, but it made him feel uncomfortable to be financially reliant on her. He was concerned that she might wind up feeling resentful if that went on for too long. This was what encouraged him to push for more work and to become more financially responsible, so he could pay for his own expenses rather than relying on her to do it for him.

In the second interview, Tai talked about how their situation had been temporarily reversed during the intervening year, where he had been working full-time and his partner had been on fewer hours. They had had discussions about work and their relationship and she had decided to take up a second job, it seems, at least partly, so that she could feel like she was making an equal contribution towards their financial upkeep. The positive impact of this relationship was especially important, because from her inspiring him to work harder and improve his life it seems he then came to inspire her to work harder as well, illustrating the powerful reciprocal impact of positive relationships.

Several young people had gone through a significant change in their attitude towards work after having children. In addition to Mikaere and Niuhaus, Amanda, Arthur's mum and PMK, talked about how much more responsible he had become since establishing a relationship with a partner who had children. He had faced many challenges including expulsion from school, unemployment, getting into trouble with the law, and damaging the house he and Amanda were renting, leading to both of them being evicted. After moving out to live on his own and then moving in with a partner who had children, she felt like he had a real awakening:

*... and then from there he met his girlfriend and moved into the flat and that, that's when I realised that it hit him smack bang in the face, that he was out on his own. And then he sort of realised nah I can't do this, I've gotta pay my board first, I've gotta, I've gotta get food first. And*

*then he sort of stopped some of the mates that were coming around, sort of stopped because he had no money, because he wasn't working, and he sort of realised, well they weren't really friends. And now that he's moved in with his girlfriend it's sort of upped the responsibility with her having kids I think, it's sort of woken him up really, quite quickly.*

At the time of the first interview the partner was pregnant with Arthur's child, but she was creating something of a barrier to him staying in his job. She was encouraging him to stay home to spend time with her instead of going to work and Amanda could see risks in this for Arthur. However, despite the challenges having a child of his own would bring, Amanda felt that the next few years would be good for him and that the increased pressure and responsibility from these magic people would have a positive overall effect on him.

From the first to the third interviews, Arthur's situation fluctuated with temporary work, an arrest for driving over the blood-alcohol limit leading to a prison sentence and the subsequent loss of his job. By the last interview, he was optimistic, working more than full-time hours and earning enough to support his partner and daughter. He felt pressured to work virtually every day, which was something he was reluctant to do because he wanted to spend time with his daughter as she grew up. Overall, however, he enjoyed the work and he respected his boss, and he seemed to feel extremely positive about his life.

In the second interview, Isaac was in the process of getting a benefit set up but hoping to go into studying for a trade, and his PMK – his partner – felt like being able to provide for the child was his main priority:

*I think he just wants to find something so he can support the*

*baby when she comes. I think that's his biggest thing right now. But he wants to have money for her, he doesn't wanna be, you know he doesn't wanna be unemployed, he wants to actually do something. And yeah that's his big priority is just her at the moment. Or when she comes he wants to have things for her and get her things and just be there for her like, you know, any other dad would wanna be there for their girl. That's another big change in his life.*

She also talked about changes in his personality, how he had become more enthusiastic and positive about things recently. Unfortunately, in the third interview he had just lost a job for taking too many days off to look after his daughter. He said that he did not see himself going back to illegal means of earning money but he was feeling a significant amount of stress from needing to provide for both his partner and their daughter and not having much success finding work. These accounts show how tenuous and precarious positive change can be (see Johnston et al., 2018).

### **Above and beyond the call of duty**

Teachers and educators who had a real impact on young people were often those who went above and beyond what they were professionally required to do. They demonstrated a genuine interest in the life of the young person and were committed to making a difference for them. In a similar way to Arthur's magic teacher giving him food at lunchtime, being available to help the young person cope with problems that were not strictly related to education could be necessary to make education a better place for them. Ahurei remembered a primary school teacher who she felt was especially kind to her. When she was struggling to understand things, this teacher would take the time to make sure she had caught up and was following the lesson before moving on, unlike other

teachers whom she felt “*don’t tell you half of the question or half of what you’re doing, and then go to the next person, so you don’t know what you’re doing*”. More than that though, she also remembered how this teacher would stop and help her out in the streets if they ran into each other. This teacher was available to Ahurei in more than just class time and she even came to the funeral of a family member.

Tane’s magic person was a school Dean as well as his teacher. He would give him lunch and when he was having problems, he would take Tane into his office, talk to him, let him use his computer and give him the space to think about things. Showing an awareness that Tane’s problems might extend beyond the immediate issue and that punishing him for misbehaviour would not improve his situation, meant a lot to Tane. Although he was eventually expelled, Tane learned from the Dean’s actions that sometimes professionals would see beyond the labels applied to him and try to provide a positive pathway forward. This meant that in the future, he was likely to be more receptive to educational opportunities and other help provided through formal services.

Carmela’s Year 13 Chemistry teacher provided a safe place for her to stay while she completed her final year of school. The teacher realised that without this, Carmela would not be able to continue with her schoolwork as the disruption and violence she faced at home would ultimately push her onto the streets. In addition to providing her with a safe place to live, Carmela’s situation was unusual in that the teacher remained in contact with her after she left school.

Marama told the interviewer about her amazing aunt who was a tutor at the alternative education programme she attended. Marama explained that her aunt was smart and helped the students to understand things they had previously struggled with. She was from

a similar background to the students so she understood where they were coming from, and most significantly, for Marama, her aunt would even take in students who had nowhere to live.

Thomas also had a magic tutor who went the extra mile for him. He explained that he did not have any good male role models. He felt like no-one was listening to him when he tried to explain the challenges he was facing and asked for help. He did not understand why no-one wanted to hear him. As a result, he started committing crimes, specifically stealing, to get people to pay attention to him. This led to several family group conferences; a restorative justice process where young people are brought together with their families and, in his case, the police and his victims, to confront his actions. He talked about how overwhelmed he was by having to face a room full of people who were angry with him, but how in one instance his tutor came to support him and took him out for lunch afterwards. This made a huge difference to him, because he felt like there was just one person on his side and that *“even though it’s just [fast food], you know, just the kind gesture, it really brought me out of a dark place”*. As a result of this, he felt more able to constructively engage with the restorative process.

Elenoa had a similar experience to Emere whose teacher was like a father figure. She explained that her Maori language teacher was *“like a mum”*, who explained things to her and spent time with her and other students outside of class, even offering her a place to stay, and that generally she felt *“if I needed anything that I could always go to her”*. She also explained how, even aside from the things the teacher did for her in particular, the simple fact that the teacher was willing to go out of her way to help other people drew Elenoa to her.

Turumai was fortunate in having several magic people, chief among whom was a tutor at a work skills course he attended. His tutor was

also a mentor for him, and provided a lot of support as he transitioned into work. He was referred to the course by the court as an alternative to a criminal conviction, and the tutor seemed to recognise his need to keep busy in order to stay out of trouble. The tutor went so far as to help him get a job, something which was beyond the scope of the work skills course. He felt like his parents and family had tried to help him in similar ways in the past, but they did not manage to get through to him.

Although he switched jobs across the three interviews, Turumai was one of the few young people who remained fully employed for all three interviews, using family contacts to get different jobs at different stages. However, even at the third interview, he still looked positively back on the first job and the critical role that the tutor played in this for him.

## Discussion

Professionals featured more frequently in young people's narratives as magic people in relation to educational re-engagement, while kin and peers were more often magic people in relation to employment. Professionals had the potential to have a large impact on young people's orientations to education because they controlled access to resources such as schools and courses, and they often held positions of authority. Thus, they were gatekeepers who, in choosing to use their positions to support the young person, became magic people. These professionals advocated for youth and created safe spaces in educational settings where the young person felt sufficiently secure that they could re-establish themselves as a student.

Educational professionals featured in all three themes: in relation to respect and honouring the youth and their story; in creating opportunities and giving young people another chance; and in

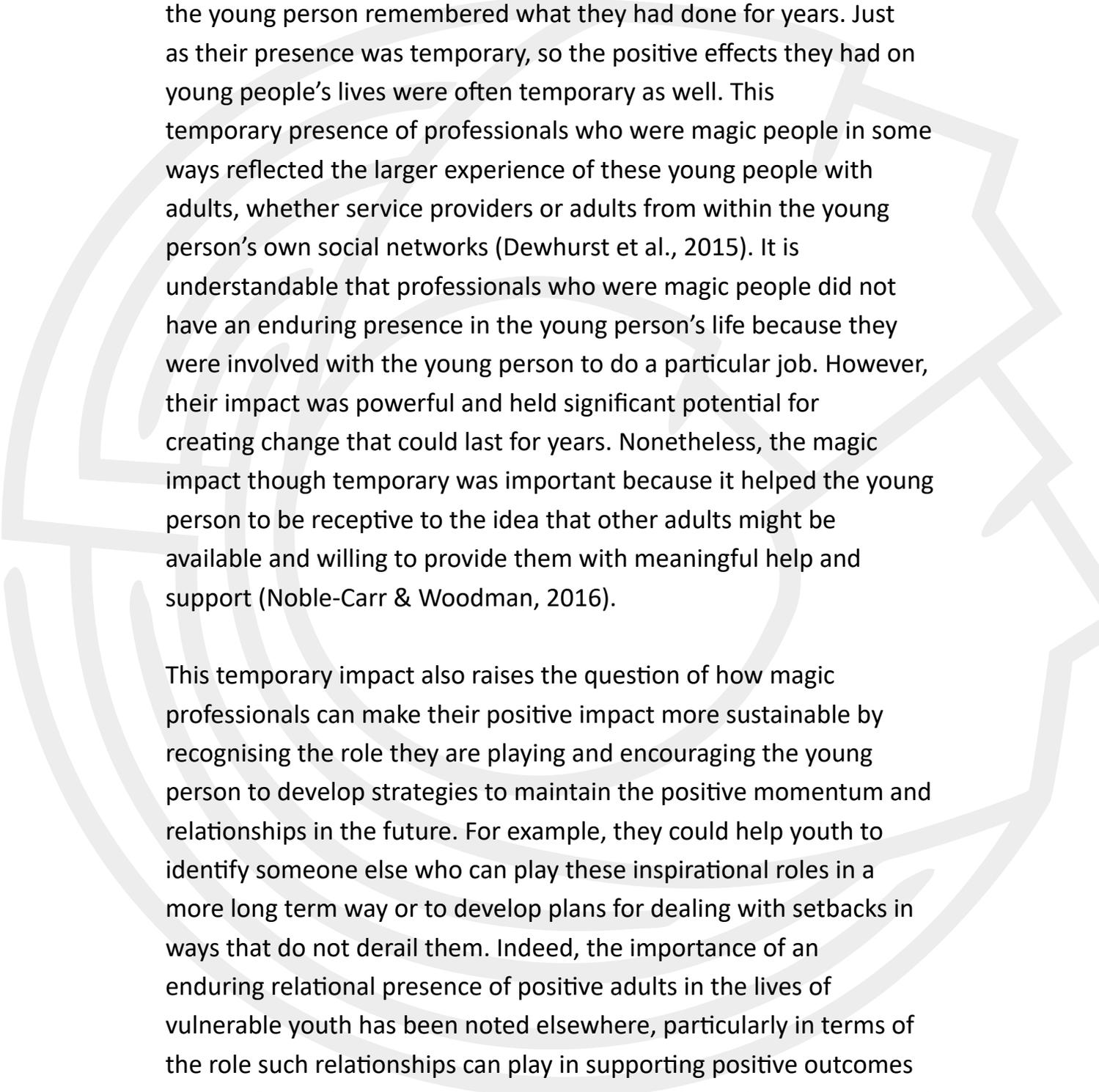
going beyond the call of duty and stretching boundaries. In some cases, the professional was also a relative of the young person and this additional connection formed part of the magic, as highlighted in Ria and Marama's stories. These particular magic relationships sat across the personal and professional domains and gave the young person a stronger connection with the educational programme by creating a sense of relational safety for them where previously they had felt exposed and vulnerable.

Young people in this study had been exposed to many significant challenges while growing up, they had access to fewer prosocial relationships that modelled positive problem solving and had access to less social and cultural capital than other youth. They experienced disruptions in key relationships, including frequent changes of caregivers, changes of school, and changes of the professionals involved in their lives (Dewhurst et al., 2015). These things made it difficult for them to perform at the same level as their peers. Adults would judge their behaviour as problematic and too difficult to deal with and pass them off to somebody else. They were often punished because teachers and other adults in positions of power interpreted their behaviour as disobedient without understanding the context in which the behaviour was embedded. Disrupted relationships then accumulated around youth, making it difficult for them to have confidence that any helping or nurturing relationship would meaningfully address their needs and endure. It thus was notable when an adult took the time to sit down with them and find out what was going on in their lives and then to offer support that meaningfully addressed their challenges. Sometimes it was as simple as providing a listening ear. As Matiu said, it was enough to make an impression upon him that a teacher just understood where he was coming from. For Ahurei, it was a teacher who took the time to explain things fully when she was struggling. What Ahurei described was essentially a teacher who engaged in good teaching practices,

but this was an unusual experience for her. In taking the time to get a real picture of what was going on in the young person's life, and also learning about how young people had tried to mediate the challenges they faced, these adults bridged a gap that the young people felt keenly in their interactions with other adults. These interactions could be transformational because they were unusual.

While much of the magic was reflected in relatively simple acts of human kindness, sometimes a young person experienced magic in the form of being given a second chance or seeing their own value through another person's eyes. Tamati was one such example and his magic person was an educator working magic across both domains of education and work. His tutor saw his potential and helped him find a job where he was given a chance to prove himself. His tutor had worked magic by creating a sense of reciprocity with Tamati. In believing in him, the tutor generated a desire on Tamati's part to be equal to this belief; he did not want to let his tutor down. This helped him become a diligent worker. However, Tamati's job was only seasonal and so the job ended leaving him back where he started. He remained unemployed for the remaining two interviews. By the third interview he was serving a community detention sentence. In the end, his energy and commitment and the impact of the tutor some three years earlier were insufficient to enable him to continue in his search to find secure work. The magic relationship had started him on a pathway, but it was insufficient to keep him on that pathway when faced with the setback of losing his first job.

Tamati's experience was not unusual. In almost no instance did a professional magic person make a meaningful reappearance in the young person's life. Although they had a major impact while they were involved, their presence was temporary. The magic was that they remained for as long as it took to have an impact and in seeking to have an impact, they creatively used their role to create a space



for change; they did not give up on the young person. However, their presence in the young person's life would always end, even if the young person remembered what they had done for years. Just as their presence was temporary, so the positive effects they had on young people's lives were often temporary as well. This temporary presence of professionals who were magic people in some ways reflected the larger experience of these young people with adults, whether service providers or adults from within the young person's own social networks (Dewhurst et al., 2015). It is understandable that professionals who were magic people did not have an enduring presence in the young person's life because they were involved with the young person to do a particular job. However, their impact was powerful and held significant potential for creating change that could last for years. Nonetheless, the magic impact though temporary was important because it helped the young person to be receptive to the idea that other adults might be available and willing to provide them with meaningful help and support (Noble-Carr & Woodman, 2016).

This temporary impact also raises the question of how magic professionals can make their positive impact more sustainable by recognising the role they are playing and encouraging the young person to develop strategies to maintain the positive momentum and relationships in the future. For example, they could help youth to identify someone else who can play these inspirational roles in a more long term way or to develop plans for dealing with setbacks in ways that do not derail them. Indeed, the importance of an enduring relational presence of positive adults in the lives of vulnerable youth has been noted elsewhere, particularly in terms of the role such relationships can play in supporting positive outcomes (Dewar & Goodman, 2014). Such enduring practices have been linked to better outcomes for vulnerable youth and so it is not surprising that these relational components featured in young people's

accounts of magic people (Jobe & Gorin 2013; McLeod 2007; Walker & Donaldson, 2010).

Being willing to go above and beyond what was expected was the third dimension of magic people. Here young people talked about professionals who went beyond the strict confines of their mandated role by responding to the realities of the young person's situation; they were creative rather than bureaucratic in their response and they stretched the boundaries of practice to ensure that the young person received meaningful support. For instance, sometimes a teacher would take a young person aside to talk about their problems rather than immediately punishing them for misbehaviour. Others took them out of class when they were struggling to give them somewhere to calm down and re-centre themselves.

This aspect of magic also extended to behaviour that might be considered unprofessional as seen in Carmela's case where the teacher gave her a place to stay for her last year of school. Given the nature of the young people's lives, creating opportunities for change required adults to be willing to provide help in non-conventional ways. Being willing to do this could mean the difference between a young person completing their schooling and dropping out early. The interviews contained numerous examples of young people who fell out of the education system because nobody was willing to provide them with necessities like somewhere to live. When professionals helped the young person to find accommodation, or as in Carmela's case, provided it themselves, they created that magic space where change became possible. While it is important to understand the requirements of professional roles and accountabilities, the incredibly complex and difficult nature of the lives of these young people meant that sharp boundaries were not always helpful. If the goal is to provide meaningful opportunities for youth who have faced much adversity to have a chance to progress their lives, there are situations when somebody needs to be willing to step outside these

boundaries and pay attention to the young person's most pressing needs and be willing to provide for them. In doing this they become the magic people who can create the possibility for transformational change.

Kin and peers featured more prominently than professionals as magic people in enabling youth to see legitimate employment as a viable pathway for them. As was the case with professionals, there were relatively few examples of magic people in the narratives and there were more examples of kin and peers playing damaging and destructive roles in the lives of young people than there were positive examples. That said, magic kin and peers played a very important and longer term role than professionals in supporting the young people to sustain their focus on finding and keeping jobs because the relationships endured over time. In this regard, it is important to consider the way that the magic professionals might have been able to create an extended effect for the young person had they been able to locate an adult member of the kin network who could take over their role once they needed to step back, and to support that person to become the young person's advocate. Indeed, elsewhere it has been observed that whole whānau/family approaches increase the protective factors that support positive change that can be sustained. Therefore, identifying and working with positive adults in the extended kin network can provide a means of ensuring that 'magic' effects continue after the professional intervention is complete (Walker & Donaldson, 2010).

These positive adults inspired youth to continue searching for work when faced with many rejections, and encouraged them to think beyond illegal earning or benefit dependency as their sole source of income. For instance, Ari's nan had a powerful impact upon him that lasted beyond her death and inspired him to not only seek legitimate work on his own, but to support many of his peers, who were also

part of a criminal gang, to make these changes as well. Ari's story provides a compelling illustration of the way that a magic person can play a transformational role that extends beyond their daily contact with a young person such that even when no longer present they continue to exert a powerfully positive transformative force. In a similar way, Tangaroa's uncle had encouraged him to look beyond his immediate horizons, which contained many examples of people drawing their living from illegal means, to aspire to legitimate work. These kin adults were able to use their special relationship with the young person to inspire them to believe in themselves and to launch out into the unknown world of work (see Alessi, 2018c).

Partners and children also played a transformative magic role for the young people in relation to job-seeking. Having a partner and/or children generated the desire to be providers and good role models. Although their role was often less direct than professionals and adult kin, who provided access to resources or shared life lessons that were inspirational, these magic people were powerful forces in youth narratives. Their presence in the young person's life provided the transformational force keeping them moving in a positive direction and giving them the determination to try again after setbacks. Their impact was seen primarily in activating the self-belief and hopeful elements of the magic person. The need to support a partner or to contribute equally to the household and to be a good provider for children focused the young person intensely on creating a normative pathway to work, either directly or through the completion of education. Mikaere, Niuhaus, Tai and Arthur all provided examples of partners and children playing this type of magic person role. The complexity of building sustainable pathways to legitimate work that was secure were seen in Mikaere's account. Initially his sister had provided some impetus but this was eclipsed by the arrival of his baby, and providing for his daughter became his driving force. However, the tension between being close to reliable

transport and close to his daughter generated risks for Mikaere that had the potential to draw him back into criminal activity. Niuhaus had experienced a wake-up call from a violent assault. When combined with a wife and children as his magic people, Niuhaus embarked on a process of extricating himself from a gang so that he could build a pathway into legitimate work that would sustain his whānau. These special relationships held great change-potential for the young people.

Meily's story featured a friend playing a magic role by encouraging her to keep attending her course. Niuhaus recounted the magic role his gang-associates played in enabling him to move away from offending and gang life and into steady employment. When Ari decided to build his life around legitimate work, he provided motivation for his negative peer group to also make these changes and, in the process, he became a magic person for his peers. These three stories regarding the positive role of a peer group stand in marked contrast to the predominant pattern of peer groups making it difficult for youth to forge a prosocial future for themselves.

Across the study, friends were a double-edged sword. They provided a significant amount of emotional support and sense of belonging but at the same time youth realised that spending time with an anti-social peer group stood in the way of their desire to complete their education and find legitimate work. While it was common for young people to recognise the risks contained in peer groups that engaged in and encouraged offending almost none had been able to break out of these groups and create change. Meily, Niuhaus and Ari's cases aside, taking steps towards legitimate work usually meant that the young person had to strike out on their own with no support. This decision then was extremely isolating and required considerable courage. The complexity of dealing with social groups that could contain extremely close bonds while also being a direct threat to their

changes was a struggle (Sanders et al., 2017). Given the shortage of other prosocial relationships in their lives, most chose to stay with the relationships they knew. Despite their rarity, the three examples illustrated the potential resources that friend relationships could play in assisting youth to stay on a positive change course if viable options were given to their peer group, or if the youth was supported as they built new peer relationships. Thus, while friends did not commonly hold the magic person transformative potential in terms of orienting the youth towards educational engagement and employment seeking, when they did play this role it was powerful and often sustained.

By generating receptivity to education and employment, magic people opened up the possibility of a positive, prosocial future for the young people where this had previously not been apparent. Translating this potential into concrete, sustainable change, however, required ongoing support and resources that were often beyond the scope of the magic relationship and out of reach of the young person.

All of the young people involved in the study had been exposed to trouble and risk throughout their lives, this by no means ended when a magic person inspired them to commit to a prosocial pathway. Some were lucky enough that the magic person appeared at the same time as a viable job that was reliable and that remunerated them sufficiently to be able to meet their needs. Without this coincidence of circumstance, the desire and motivation to take positive steps that was activated by the magic person would likely be insufficient to support sustained positive change. Mikaere's story demonstrated how fragile gains were. When confronted with two equally difficult choices youth often found themselves reverting to past, high risk coping strategies. Indeed, even when youth experienced a magic person and gained access to a legitimate work opportunity, most found their marginalised experiences were

repeated numerous times before they found stability. They remained vulnerable to unemployment, many struggled to manage living costs, and the threat of homelessness remained. With each of these threats and nothing to draw them away from negative social connections, the likelihood of reverting to their default risk-based survival strategies increased. Those who tried to break away from their past needed to be prepared to accept that their challenges would be repeated, and that they would likely face these with little or no support. In order to find different pathways many had to cut themselves off from their learned survival strategies and the relationships that, while bringing risk exposure, had also sustained them. This meant that a commitment to legal living essentially meant an acceptance that they could be helpless in the face of difficulties, such as covering their daily costs including paying back debt and fines. The decision to seek legitimate work by no means carried a guarantee that they would be able to achieve a reliable legal living (see also Alessi et al., 2018b; Johnston et al. 2018).

A key lesson from the stories of magic people could be clearly seen in Ari and Tangaroa's narratives. Flowing from their experience of a magic person were a series of positive connections with other people who were located within their own networks. These connections provided ongoing support for the youth as they continued on their life journeys. It has been discussed above that many magic people were only in their young person's life for a short period of time, and that their practical influence was often equally short-lived. It is telling then that two of the young people who successfully managed to transition out of illegal means of earning had experiences beyond this; the magic person in some way potentiated openness to or the presence of other positive influences around the young person. Although Ari's magic person died, her influence was what pushed him to want to improve his life – in this way, his story was like many others. His story is distinguished however, in that he first managed

to create and sustain positive change, and then that he was able to activate his own network to assist him. While in the first interview, his nan was his only inspiration, in the second interview he had managed to expand his change to include members of his social group, and in the third interview his circle included them, his partner, his child, his cousins, and he was trying to be a positive role model for his brother. While a magic person was what initiated a new way to think about himself and his future, the change in his life came alongside a sustained increase in positive, prosocial relationships providing support and motivation to him to continue pursuing the changes that he wanted to see in his life. In a similar way, Tangaroa began with the influence of his uncle but over the interviews this expanded to include his partner and child, both of whom inspired him to continue seeking improvement. While a direct timeline was not given in either case, it is easy to see how the lives of these two young people could have taken a different direction. For instance, not being able to find any work might have led to them failing to connect with people seeking more productive and prosocial pathways, which then led to them losing the positive impetus for change. Alternately, a failure to connect with other people seeking more productive and prosocial pathways could have led to them not being sufficiently confident to take steps to find work, resulting in them losing the positive impetus for change. When combined with the types of social connections that actively inhibit positive change, and the types of work that exploit, abuse, or are otherwise unsustainable for young people, it is apparent why Ari and Tangaroa's stories were uncommon – work opportunities and positive social connections almost had to coincide and endure in order for change to be made and sustained.

This raises two important points. First, one of the ways professionals can best help young people is by helping them identify and connect with other people who will continue to support their development in an enduring way. When the young people have identified a

positive network of supportive people seeking prosocial pathways, they have a supportive group who will provide ongoing support to them in building those pathways for themselves. Second, when young people try to make positive improvement they may need to not only voluntarily surrender their learnt non-normative survival strategies, but also to isolate themselves from many or all of the social contacts who have supported them. When young people are supported to identify and sustain positive networks, they will not be forced to isolate themselves, and they may also find themselves with groups who can provide physical resources – for example food and temporary accommodation – that assist their transition away from past survival strategies and stop them from feeling vulnerable or helpless.

## Conclusion

Magic people had huge potential. They could play a pivotal role in reorienting youth towards education and to legitimate work as viable options for them. In this way, magic people had the potential to change the life pathways of these vulnerable youth. A key dimension of the magic was the experience of a supportive, committed positive relationship with an adult; this increased youth receptivity to support and active engagement with the possibility of positive change.

The literature consistently identifies that an enduring positive relationship with at least one adult has a powerful protective effect for vulnerable youth. The narratives of young people in this research clearly illustrated that while the magic person retained their involvement positive effects were experienced (Dewar & Goodman, 2014; Duncan, Miller & Sparks, 2007; Fallis, 2012). Indeed, there is evidence from elsewhere that such relationships have a more powerful impact on positive outcomes than the characteristics of the

individual youth or the risks and challenges they confront (Bastiaanssen et al., 2014; DuMont, Widom & Czaja, 2007; Liebenberg, Sanders & Munford, 2016). If they are able to build and sustain these positive, productive relationships with vulnerable youth, professionals have the potential to be a critical change resource in these young people's lives. Such strong, committed, positive relationships will not happen spontaneously however and it has been argued that building these relationships are an intervention in their own right that require careful attention (Duncan, Miller & Sparks, 2004; Kroll, 2010; Ruch et al., 2010).

It was clear from the young people's narratives that magic relationships occurred when adults came from a position of genuine respect, communicated high aspirations for the young person and created opportunities for them to exercise personal agency and develop new life skills. These aspects reflect the renewed emphasis in social work on relational practice (Ruch, Turney & Ward, 2010) and with the Big Three elements of positive youth development (sustained, positive relationships with caring adults, the development of life skills and opportunities for engagement and empowerment (Sanders, Munford & Liebenberg, 2017)).

Magic people helped youth to feel a sense of belonging, to want to make a positive contribution and to be confident that support would continue even when they made mistakes. By advocating for youth and opening up their networks to the young person, they provided access to a range of resources that were relevant to the young person's circumstances.

The common factor that limited the capacity of the professional magic person to have a sustained impact was that the relationship was time limited. It may be that these professionals were unaware of the powerful impact they had on the young person's prospects and

so did not realise the impact that their withdrawal from the young person's life might have, or it might have been that the mandate for the professional to be involved ran out and they could not continue the relationship. Limiting factors in kin and peer magic people often involved a lack of knowledge, resources and networks that could unlock access to employment and educational opportunities.

The foregoing suggests some steps professionals can take to become a magic person who will have an enduring impact on the life chances of vulnerable youth:

1. Create an enduring relationship based on genuine care, empathy and respect;
2. Invest time in learning about the young person's previous experiences, identify their strengths, their hopes and dreams;
3. Understand the way that the risks they have confronted while growing up influence their behaviour and constrain the available choices, identify strategies that will diminish the impact of these risks;
4. Learn about the other relationships in their lives, even those that bring risks, and identify those that can be harnessed in the change process, support these people;
5. Support the young person to identify a positive prosocial adult in the community who is able to provide ongoing support beyond the intervention and then support that adult to identify positive resources in the community and to learn how to continue to support the youth when things go wrong. Think about how you can support these people to become a positive enduring presence for the young person and remain as a key support in the long term;
6. Provide practical resources and action-focused support along side reflective support. This will include encouraging youth to learn from their mistakes and to develop new plans when

things go wrong;

7. Recognise that small steps towards change are important and celebrate these;
8. Understand that a small act of kindness can have a big impact on youth receptivity to and confidence in their capacity to accept support and to begin to change;
9. Understand that the involvement of professionals can be frightening and confusing because interventions ask young people to embark on a journey into the unknown. Take this into account when interacting with the young person.



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