Young People's Behaviour Tells a Story

Technical Report 10

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the young people who have participated in this study and taken the time to share their experiences with us. They have been generous in their time and in the effort they have put into answering complex questionnaires and participating in interviews over many years. Many of the youth who participated in this research also nominated an adult who knew a lot about them (PMK) who we could interview. We would also like to thank all the PMK who generously gave their time to this study.

Introduction

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

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

2012; Bottrell, 2009; Fleming, 2011; McLaren, 2002; Munford & Sanders, 2004; Sanders & Munford, 2005).

Methodology [1]

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

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

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

In total 1477 youth participated in the research. All of these youth

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

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: youth justice, child welfare, mental health, and educational services additional to mainstream classroom programmes. These services were provided by both statutory and non-governmental (NGO) providers[2]. Youth were recruited into the qualitative sample, which is the focus of this paper, from the 605 multiple-service using youth on the basis of their risk and resilience scores in the survey phase. Youth who scored above the mean on a composite risk measure and who also either scored above the mean on a resilience measure or below the mean on this measure were interviewed for the qualitative phase. Youth were interviewed by trained interviewers, and a semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the interview which covered topics such as relationships with family/whānau and peers, experiences of school and other services, the risks young people identified in their lives and how they managed these, their definitions of what it would mean to achieve successful outcomes, their understanding of health and wellbeing, and their suggestions about how effective services could be provided. Youth were interviewed individually in a location of their choosing. These interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Youth were also asked to nominate a person who knew the most about them, and this person completed a qualitative interview as well. Finally, youth were asked to give permission for researchers to access up to four of their service case files and 291 files were reviewed as part of this process. The current paper focuses on youth in the New Zealand sample and

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

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 young people to achieve positive outcomes, resources need to be activated around them that reduce risks at the same time as support is provided that enables them to harness their own resilience resources. Young people 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 young people and their families/whānau experience accessing resources and supports from multiple service systems, have been systematically investigated. The Pathways to Resilience Research Programme seeks to address this gap in knowledge and the current paper focuses on one part of this larger research endeavour.

This paper examines the patterns that emerged from analysis of one thematic node in the qualitative data set. It draws on data from the qualitative interviews with young people. Analysis of these interviews indicated that young people engaged in a wide range of what could be described as 'risky', 'dangerous' and 'dysfunctional' behaviours. However, far from being irrational acts of thrill-seeking, the behaviours served a purpose and told a story. Through listening to the narratives shared by the young people in the research, we were able to explore the stories behind their troubled and dangerous behaviours. Many of the young people had complex family backgrounds, lived in communities that experienced high levels of social and economic deprivation and had been exposed to risk factors such as drug and alcohol use, domestic violence, low socio-economic status, and lower levels of involvement with mainstream education. As such, the young people faced a variety of risks in their lives which

they had to navigate on their pathway through adolescence and into young adulthood. The young people discussed how they used their behaviour to achieve a goal, whether it was to meet a physical or emotional need, to feel secure in their identity, or to gain control over their lives when they felt powerless.

The following discussion, supplemented with case examples[3], explores the young people's narratives on their behaviours. It begins with a discussion about how young people behaved in certain ways in order to survive their challenging and complex circumstances. It then turns to a discussion of how young people were intentional in the ways they used their behaviours to draw attention to their needs. The third section examines the young people's narratives about 'behaving badly' to fit in. The next two sections address two groups of behaviours that emerged as significant to the young people: self-harm and suicidal behaviours, and leadership behaviours. Finally, the discussion turns to exploring the ways in which young people were supported by services and their families/whānau to make changes to their behaviours and establish positive strategies for meeting their needs.

Behaviours for survival: 'It's me vs the world'

The lives of the young people in this study were complex and challenging. The resources they needed in order to develop healthy and resilient identities were not always readily available (Munford and Sanders, 2014). For some, the adults in their lives were not responsive to their needs. As such, these young people had to develop strategies to gain access to the resources they required to meet some of their basic needs, to develop an identity and feel powerful in their own lives. The young people who behaved 'badly' often had disrupted or non-existent relationships with their parents or caregivers, and thus limited awareness and experience of

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3   All names and identifying information have been changed.

positive social relationships. Positive relationships with parents/ caregivers and others can provide young people with access to some of the emotional resources they need. These include a sense of identity and acceptance, and support when they face challenges in life. However, when these relationships are interrupted or non-existent, young people need to find these resources from other places (Munford & Sanders, 2014; Munford & Sanders, 2011; Sanders et al., 2012; Ungar, 2004). Young people explained that they needed to protect themselves or their siblings from the risks present in their home environments, and behaved in ways that they felt would best achieve this. Many of these young people felt that they were isolated in their endeavour to navigate through adolescence. Their complex lives, lack of supportive relationships and experiences of circumstanc-es beyond their control led to the development of a 'me vs the world' frame of reference that informed their interactions with adults. These young people learned to meet their needs on their own, often by engaging in behaviours that were risky, destructive, and escalated until they were beyond the control of the young person. However, they were behaviours that, at least initially, enabled the young people to meet their basic needs and develop an identity and sense of control over their circumstances. The following case example introduces Tamati, a young man who felt that his needs would not be met at home and so left home to take care of himself and his younger brother. His story illustrates how young people engaged in a wide range of behaviours to find food, money and shelter.

Tamati

Tamati lived with his mother and two siblings, until he was five years old. Shortly after his fifth birthday, Tamati and his siblings were placed in the care of their grandmother. Tamati spent much of his childhood going back and forth between the care of his grandmother and mother, as both found his behaviours too challenging to deal with. Tamati started getting into trouble at school, truanting, and being

uncooperative at home. He ran away from his grandmother's house to return to the care of his mother on numerous occasions. He recognised that the care of his mother was less than satisfactory. He was often not given enough food, and was required to take responsibility for the care of his younger siblings when he was there. However, he felt that he was more welcome at home with his mother than with his grandmother:

> I didn't really like her [grandmother]… like she didn't really pay much attention to me and my younger brother. That's why we took off back to Mum's.

However, once his mother had more children, Tamati felt that his needs were not being met at home either:

> My Mum was looking after other kids; she had too much on her plate to be looking after the whole lot of us. I know she couldn't handle it, but yea we just decided to go our own ways.

He started committing crimes, stealing so he had food and money. When he was 12, Tamati took his younger brother with him to live on the street, where he felt he could look after them both. During this period, he became involved with a group of youth who he described as the 'wrong boys'; these young people were committing crimes, stealing, drinking and smoking. Tamati felt accepted by this group, and decided to stay with them. He reflected in his interview that he felt that the boys were always there for him when he needed them. However, over time his behaviour became progressively more destructive, as he was drawn into increasingly serious criminal activity. Eventually, Tamati ended up becoming involved with youth justice, and later the adult justice system.

To an outsider, Tamati's behaviour might appear to be purely

delinquent; he was a young teenager truanting from school and finding a thrill in stealing and committing other crimes. However, once Tamati's story is explored in detail from his perspective, we see that his behaviour was not irrational, nor purely thrill-seeking. He engaged in dangerous behaviours, such as running away and stealing, in order to meet his needs and those of his younger brother. In doing this, Tamati also found acceptance in the peer group he chose and experienced a sense of belonging. He was able to assert his identity with them and have control over a chaotic life through committing crimes that gave him a sense of power and which also met his basic needs for food and shelter.

Rhiannon

Another young person who felt that she was alone in her efforts to survive was Rhiannon. Throughout her childhood, Rhiannon frequently moved from town to town with her family. As she grew up, her relationship with her parents became increasingly strained, as she reacted to the stress of regular moves and subsequent changes in school. When Rhiannon was 13, she was asked by her parents to move out of home, as their relationship had deteriorated dramatically. When Rhiannon reflected back on how she survived after leaving home, she told us:

> *I stole everything. I had no clothes or anything and I just stole it. I would go and sell what I stole for money… Or if I needed food, I would go to [the supermarket] and steal something to eat.*

Rhiannon felt that the best way to ensure she could meet her needs was to engage in risky behaviours. She did not have access to the resources provided by a positive peer group, nor did she have the support of her parents to meet her needs.

Young people like Rhiannon and Tamati found themselves living on
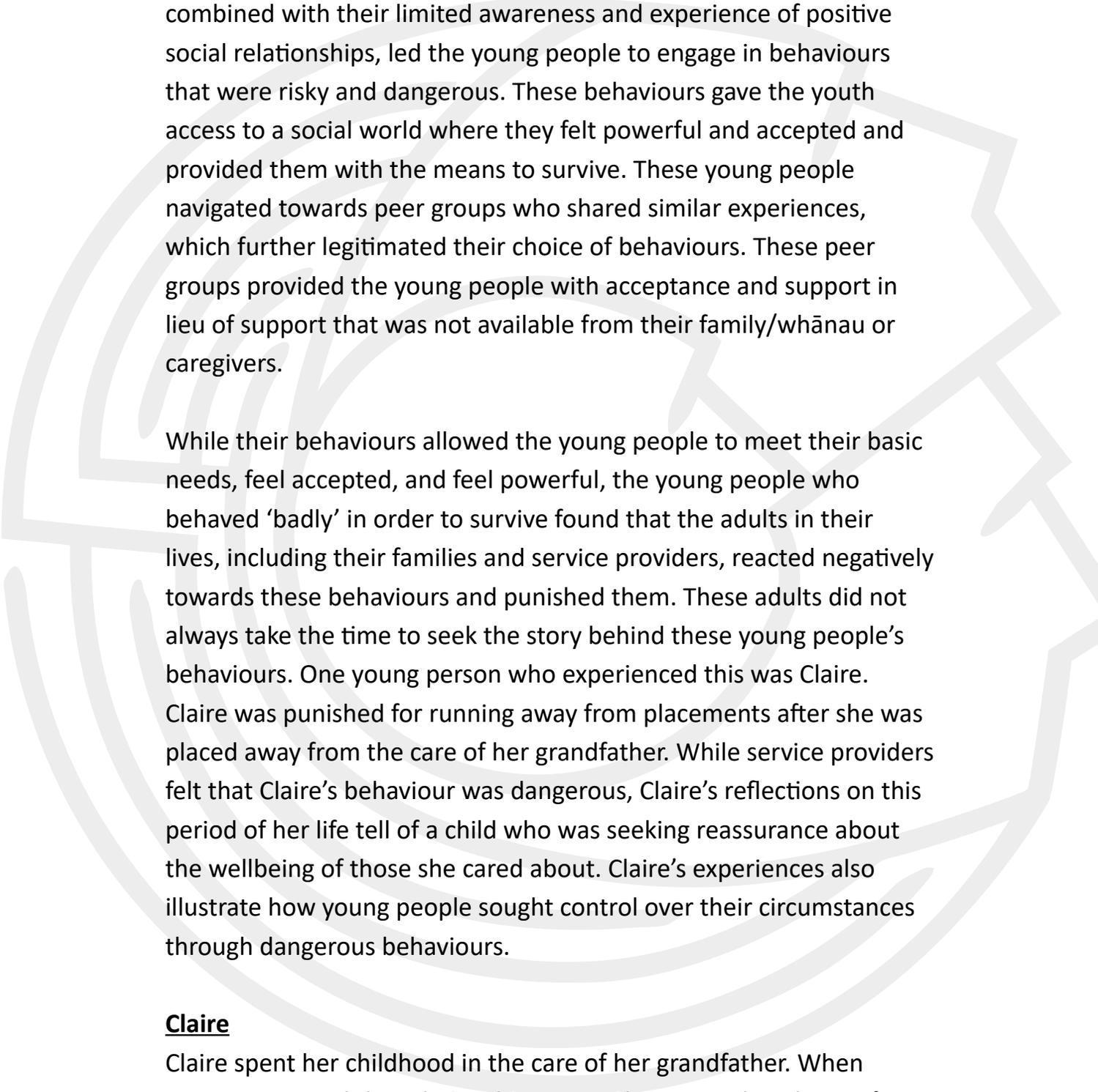
the edges of society, in circumstances that perpetuated the feeling that they were alone in facing the challenges presented to them. This, combined with their limited awareness and experience of positive social relationships, led the young people to engage in behaviours that were risky and dangerous. These behaviours gave the youth access to a social world where they felt powerful and accepted and provided them with the means to survive. These young people navigated towards peer groups who shared similar experiences, which further legitimated their choice of behaviours. These peer groups provided the young people with acceptance and support in lieu of support that was not available from their family/whānau or caregivers.

While their behaviours allowed the young people to meet their basic needs, feel accepted, and feel powerful, the young people who behaved 'badly' in order to survive found that the adults in their lives, including their families and service providers, reacted negatively towards these behaviours and punished them. These adults did not always take the time to seek the story behind these young people's behaviours. One young person who experienced this was Claire. Claire was punished for running away from placements after she was placed away from the care of her grandfather. While service providers felt that Claire's behaviour was dangerous, Claire's reflections on this period of her life tell of a child who was seeking reassurance about the wellbeing of those she cared about. Claire's experiences also illustrate how young people sought control over their circumstances through dangerous behaviours.

Claire

Claire spent her childhood in the care of her grandfather. When concerns around the relationship arose, Claire was placed away from his care. She found this traumatising, and felt that her social worker did not adequately explain the reasons why she was placed away

from her grandfather. Claire was also concerned about her grandfather's wellbeing, as she had been his primary support person. Claire reacted to the stress of not knowing how her grandfather was by running away from her placements to return to him. She found that running away not only allowed her to be where she wanted to be, but over time this gave her a sense of power and control over her circumstances:

> *I've run all the time. For no reason, just because I can. That's my control, my power...Because when you know you can [run away] they have no control anymore.*

Each time Claire ran away from her caregivers, she was picked up by her social worker and returned to her foster home. Claire's behaviour became increasingly destructive; as a young teenager, she was taking drugs, being paid for sex, and living on the streets. To try to protect her, she was placed in a residential facility. However, she interpreted this as 'punishment', and reacted to this by continuing with her disruptive and destructive behaviours. She felt that when she talked to her social workers, they did not understand her perspective and would try to develop plans for the future that she did not agree with. Such responses reinforced Claire's belief that her 'bad' behaviour was the most effective way of communicating with adults as when she behaved 'badly' she felt she had power. When she tried to communicate in other ways, she felt that she was ignored and that her concerns were not heard.

Young people like Tamati, Rhiannon and Claire show an ability to survive in very challenging circumstances. They possess a remarkable ability to access the resources they need to survive, even when this means behaving in troubling and harmful ways (Ungar, 2004). One of common characteristics amongst young people who behaved in these ways was a lack of attachment, or a disrupted attachment, to their
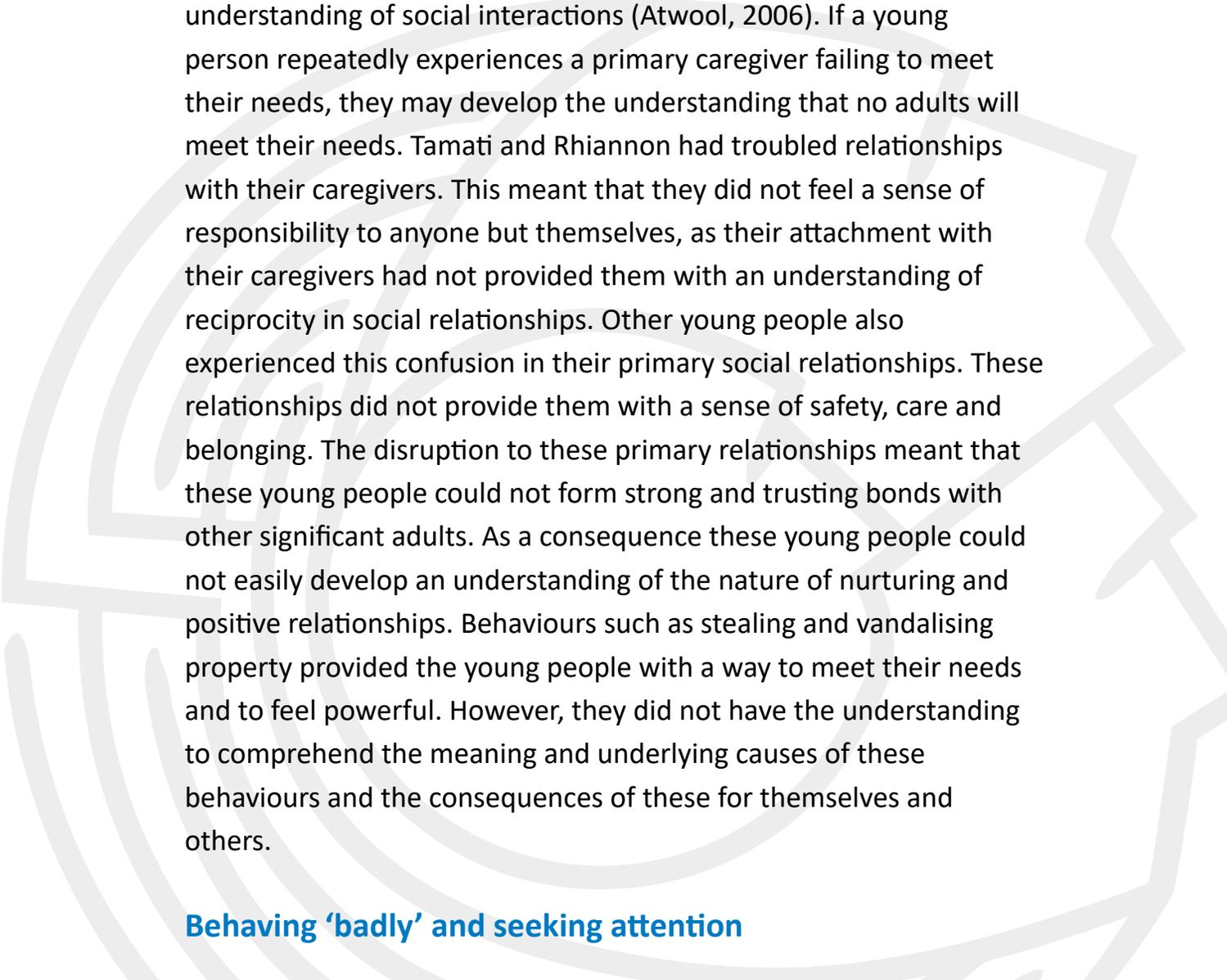
primary caregivers or another key adult. The way in which young people develop attachment to the adults in their lives shapes their understanding of social interactions (Atwool, 2006). If a young person repeatedly experiences a primary caregiver failing to meet their needs, they may develop the understanding that no adults will meet their needs. Tamati and Rhiannon had troubled relationships with their caregivers. This meant that they did not feel a sense of responsibility to anyone but themselves, as their attachment with their caregivers had not provided them with an understanding of reciprocity in social relationships. Other young people also experienced this confusion in their primary social relationships. These relationships did not provide them with a sense of safety, care and belonging. The disruption to these primary relationships meant that these young people could not form strong and trusting bonds with other significant adults. As a consequence these young people could not easily develop an understanding of the nature of nurturing and positive relationships. Behaviours such as stealing and vandalising property provided the young people with a way to meet their needs and to feel powerful. However, they did not have the understanding to comprehend the meaning and underlying causes of these behaviours and the consequences of these for themselves and others.

Behaving 'badly' and seeking attention

Some of the young people in this study used their behaviours to ensure they received the attention they needed, particularly when something in their lives was not right. These young people recognised that their parents, teachers and service providers responded when they behaved in certain ways, particularly when the behaviours were considered annoying, troubled or dangerous. As such, the young people repeatedly engaged in these behaviours to draw attention to the fact that they had concerns about their experiences. The next

case example introduces Jason. Jason was a young man who found that the adults in his life paid more attention to him when he behaved 'badly' and aggressively. He used behaviour to illustrate to his parents and teachers that he was finding school challenging.

Jason

Jason struggled with his school work, particularly after he changed schools and found he did not fit in with any of the peer groups there. After only three weeks at his new school, Jason was suspended for bullying other students, being uncooperative with teachers, and attempting to vandalise school property. When we asked Jason about this, he told us:

> [When I was asked what was going on], I just kept to myself. Tried to stick it out there for a few days you know, tried to suck it up coz I know that school is important so, it just all got too much and I didn't know what to do so I started doing stupid things to get me into trouble.

For Jason, the way in which he could get the support he needed to cope with the change in school was to get into trouble. This behaviour appeared to be counter-productive to the goal of getting support for his educational and social needs. However, his 'bad' behaviour and his teachers' reactions to this had a positive outcome for Jason, as it led to him becoming involved in an alternative education programme that did meet his needs, and where he felt accepted. Outcomes were not always as positive as this, and Damon's experiences illustrate this.

Damon

Damon had been sentenced to a youth justice residential facility after being convicted of a number of criminal offences. While he was in this placement, his behaviour had improved and he had gained a number of educational qualifications. As his time in residence drew to a close, he worked with his key worker to develop a plan for his release. However, despite having input into the plan and agreeing with what was initially decided, his plan was

changed due to a range of administrative issues with the course he had chosen. Damon was not involved with any discussion around this, and was informed at a meeting that he was no longer going to be enrolled in the course. As a result of this, his behaviour deteriorated; he became uncooperative and violent towards people he felt were stopping him from being able to pursue his educational aspirations. Damon felt that his worker was not listening to his wishes and giving his goals adequate consideration. He was not able to understand that some of the reasons for him not being able to do the course were beyond the control of the worker as the reasons were not explained to him in a way that he could understand.

This situation was repeated a number of times following Damon's release from residence. Initially, he was supported to develop a plan and goals only for something beyond his control to happen that caused the plan to break down, and his worker would have to make a change to the plan. Damon found this incredibly frustrating:

> *Every time, something would happen and they (the service) would shut down the part of the plan that was the only part keeping me going, keeping me wanting to be good. And then they (the service) would wonder 'oh, why are you playing up, why don't you keep being good?' and it's like what's the point in being good when I've got nothing to work for? ... All I have been saying is sign me up for this course and I'll be sorted, I will be good 'cause I will have something to work for.*

Damon's behaviour illustrated that he was willing to engage with service providers and found motivation when services listened to and took his wishes into account in their plans. Damon's desire to complete his course of choice was a motivator for him to continue to behave positively. However, once he realised that he may not be able to complete the course that he wanted to, he used poor behaviour to show his displeasure. In this way, Damon felt that he was able to regain some of the control over his situation that he had lost when administrative issues meant he was unable to achieve his goal of

completing a particular course:

> *I only get into trouble if I have to, like how are they going to stop me from going to course here, I will run away because I don't want to stay in the house and sit down all day doing nothing playing games, yeah go out, yeah I want to learn; I want to get this qualification.*

Damon's experiences of administrative issues left him feeling powerless. He felt that his service providers could not support him to access the course he wanted to complete to develop his skills, leaving him feeling frustrated and dejected. Because of this sense of powerlessness, Damon engaged in a range of negative behaviours, such as being uncooperative and absconding from service providers. He used these behaviours as a way of gaining control and showing his service providers that he wanted to influence the direction of his life, whether they approved or not. His behaviour was not a reflection of a lack of engagement with services, but rather represented his conditional engagement when his opinions and wishes were ignored. Damon's bargaining with the services through his behaviour indicated that if they were to support him to achieve his goals, he would behave in a way that was more acceptable to them.

In a similar vein, many of the young people in the research behaved in erratic and difficult ways in order to have a level of control around their engagement with social services and to feel a sense of control over their lives. While the adults around them may have viewed their behaviour as irrational and did not understand the motivation behind it, the young people's narratives demonstrated their desire to feel powerful and valued by service providers. They felt it was important that their views were heard. If they felt that they were not being respected when they verbally expressed their concerns or goals, they

would demonstrate their displeasure through their behaviour.

Isabelle

One young woman who reflected on the importance of feeling 'heard' by service providers was Isabelle:

> If I thought I wasn't being listened to, that was when I would act up. If you listen to me, I will meet you half way… But when you are a child, you can't really sit and make deals… But if I felt that I was heard, then there was more chance of me behaving myself.

Isabelle shows us that young people made rational decisions about their behaviours even when they appeared to be irrational. While these difficult behaviours heightened tensions between youth and the adults in their lives and often placed them in harm's way, from a youth perspective they were important because they represented the only bargaining tool youth believed to be available to them. By behaving in ways they knew adults would find annoying or unacceptable, young people felt that they were able to retain control over their engagement with services and over decision making processes concerning them.

Behaving 'badly' to fit in

The narratives young people shared about their behaviours revealed that some young people behaved 'badly' in order to fit in with their peers. These young people were often already on the social margins at school and in the community, due to the range of challenges that they faced in their lives. This led to a sense that they did not 'belong' that intensified as they moved through adolescence. As such, the young people navigated towards peers whom they felt would understand their experiences and provide support; these peers were also on the social margins, and were often engaging in a range of

criminal activity or dangerous behaviours. In order to fit in with these peers, the young people felt that they needed to participate in the activities that the peer group were engaging with. Doing this gave the young person status within the group, as they proved to others that they could be 'bad' and defy the wishes of the adults involved with their lives. John's experiences of becoming involved with '*the wrong people*' illustrates how young people found acceptance and identity through being 'bad' with a peer group, and how this 'bad' behaviour often escalated until the young person became so involved that they were not able to navigate a pathway out of the peer group without significant support from others.

John

During his first year at high school, John increasingly felt that he did not 'belong' at his school. He recalled feeling like the school staff and other students judged him based on the neighbourhood where he grew up. As a way of overcoming the feeling that he did not belong anywhere, John found a group of friends who were also on the social margins at his school. These young people taught John how to steal vehicles and encouraged him to take drugs during the school day. When reflecting on these experiences, John said that he remembered feeling 'c*ool… I thought I was tough, a grown-up*'. Engaging in the 'bad' behaviour of his peers gave John status within his social group. He felt that he was no longer unwanted, and that he was instead a leader amongst his peers.

However, due to taking drugs during the school day, John was soon stood down from school and asked to attend an alternative education course. John remembered feeling that he had '*mucked up*' when he realised that being 'bad' did not make him 'cool', as he had thought. Once he started at the alternative education course, John found a new group of friends, whom he felt understood his experiences and would encourage him to be 'good' and achieve his educational goals.

John struggled to stay away from his old peer group and he would see them in the neighbourhood when he was not at his course. He was tempted to go and join them; however, he felt that he was supported by his new friends, his family/whānau, and the church he had started attending, to stay on the 'right path'.

Throughout John's narrative, there were many times when he felt that the adults in his life misunderstood his 'bad' behaviours. For example, he felt that the school stood him down without addressing the issues that were underlying his behaviour, namely the feeling that he did not belong. John did not cast himself as a 'bad boy' and throughout his narrative he shared that he was only naughty in order to get the respect of his peers and to feel that he had a place where he belonged.

Tim

Another young person who behaved 'badly' to fit in was Tim. Tim came from a family/whānau who faced a range of complex challenges; they had ties with gang members, struggled with a lack of steady income and did not have access to the support they needed to address these challenges. Tim reflected in his interview that things were good for him until he reached high school. He remembered enjoying his early years of school, and was involved with various sports teams in his local community. However, once Tim reached high school, he began to feel that sports were not enough to make him 'cool'. He also wanted to feel accepted by his family/whānau members, so he started to navigate towards peers who engaged in activities that mirrored those in his family/whānau and fitted his new sense of what was 'cool'. He began to behave like them, taking drugs at school and starting fights. He was eventually excluded from school for this. When we explored with Tim his feelings around being excluded from school, he told us, 'I was rapt. I was trying to get kicked

out'. For Tim, being cast as a 'bad boy' allowed him to feel that others viewed him as someone to be respected:

> *Fighting… it's about respect. Like being the hardest fella. No one will do anything to you 'cause they know you can waste them.*

John and Tim illustrate the choices made by many other young people in the study, 'bad' behaviour provided them with a pathway to feeling accepted and respected. Through being 'bad' these young people could build up a reputation as someone who was a leader amongst their peer group. While the adults in their lives may have disapproved of their behaviours as in the case of Jason, and ascribed labels such as 'delinquent' and 'troubled' to their behaviours, the young people viewed themselves as 'tough', 'cool', and 'powerful'. Fitting in was not always an easy endeavour for these young people and sometimes, as in the case of Tim, the need to feel a connection with his family/whānau influenced his choice of high school friends which then had serious consequences for his progress through school. The challenges these youth faced in their lives at home often set them apart from youth they met at school who were on more or less normative developmental pathways; they felt very different to these youth and youth at school could not understand their experiences. They felt powerless to change some of their circumstances, and instead sought that power and sense of belonging through alternative means and by seeking out a sense of belonging with youth who had similar backgrounds to themselves.

Other young people also behaved 'badly' to fit in with their peers, even when they appeared to have no pre-existing risk factors. These young people were often drawn to peer groups who appeared to be 'exciting' or who offered a different range of experiences to the young person.

Grace

Grace was drawn to a peer group that was different from herself. She began to engage with them, and found that she enjoyed being 'bad'. The thrill she got from truanting from school and committing minor offences outweighed the fact that as a result of this peer group association she had begun failing at school. When Grace reflected back on this period of her life, she told us:

> School was really good… to a certain point where I grew older, met different people that I probably hadn't hung out with… They kind of had a real 'out of it' lifestyle in the way they were my age but they could go out all night drinking, partying and that's what I wanted 'cause I wasn't used to it… So from there it was wagging, theft, drug use…

Grace later regretted her actions, and saw the impact her involvement with drug use had on her family. However, she was able to use her experience of behaving 'badly' to fit in to establish a goal for her future career:

> I feel like there's a like a massive piece of life out there that no-one knows of and I do and now I guess it would be cool to go to schools and help people out. I reckon if young people could listen like I know when I was young and they'd come and talk to us about drugs and that, and you just didn't listen, like you're always wanting to make up your own mind, I think I'd be forceful enough and say enough to show them 'cause like even wagging, wagging school led to one thing to another to another and to another and it just kind of like went downhill.

Grace was able to access alternative supports that allowed her to be able to remove herself from the negative influence of her peer group. She found that separating herself from her 'old life' was incredibly

challenging, as she would often meet her old friends unexpectedly. However, with support from services, her family, and new friends, she was able to develop positive ways of managing her challenges.

Grace's narrative illustrates the difficulties young people can have in separating themselves from the negative influences that shape their 'bad' behaviour when they are trying to fit in. When Grace's narrative is viewed alongside those of other young people like John and Tim, the importance of having access to alternative support systems becomes clear. Some of the young people who could not find meaningful support resorted to drastic measures to manage their feelings of despair. The next section explores two of these behaviours.

Self-harm and suicidal behaviour

Self-harm and suicidal behaviour and thoughts emerged as significant behaviours in the analysis of the young people's narratives. The young people explained that self-harm was a way of coping with extreme adversity; they often recalled feeling isolated, unsupported, and afraid of the future direction of their lives. In these contexts self-harm and suicidal behaviour provided control and a means of seeking support when other attempts to find help had failed. Self-harm and suicide are behaviours that are of particular concern to practitioners working with vulnerable young people, policy makers who seek to address self-harm and suicide, and the general public[4] (Hawton, Saunders & O'Connor, 2012; Law Commission, 2014; Ministry of Health, 2014).

A range of young men and women in the study reported self-harming

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4 See www.youthsay.co.nz Pathways to Youth Resilience: Youth Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol Services in New Zealand for more information. See also http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/page/5-Home

and suicidal behaviours as coping strategies of last resort to cope with extreme adversity. Many of the young people who self-harmed discussed feeling alone in managing the challenges they were facing and being afraid to tell other people how they were feeling. One young woman who felt this way was Drew.

Drew

Drew began self-harming in response to prolonged periods of feeling isolated and unsupported. She felt that her friends and family/whānau did not care about her, and her efforts to talk to them about this had resulted in arguments:

> I had no way to cope with it. I had no one to talk to... I found a way to cope with that by [self-harming]. And nobody did anything about it...eventually they said to me 'we think you're psycho, you need to go and see [a counsellor].' I said, 'I know I am not psycho, I know exactly why I'm doing it [self-harming]'.

For Drew, self-harming provided a coping mechanism and a way of developing a sense of control over her circumstances. Drew was dealing with a prolonged feeling that no one cared about her, and had recently been placed into the care of child welfare services. Her friends and family/whānau did not understand why she was self-harming,   and were not able to offer the support that Drew felt she needed in order to manage her feelings in a more positive way.

Ryan

Ryan also used self-harm as a way of coping. He faced challenges in dealing with isolation, problematic relationships with his family/whānau, and being bullied at school:

> I got bullied a lot [at school]... That's when I started the self-harm. That's how I dealt with it then... I was too scared to

tell anyone anything... I didn't have any friends... I didn't want my [family/whānau] to find out about anything.

Ryan did not feel able to tell his family/whānau about his trouble at school, due to the tension that existed in his relationship with them. Young people often choose to talk to their friends about their self-harming, as they feel that their peer group will understand what is happening and will not panic (Hawton et al., 2012; Jobe & Gorin, 2013). However, Ryan felt socially isolated at school, and did not have access to the support provided by a peer group. He was eventually referred to mental health services by the counselling staff at his school, whom he talked to occasionally. For many young people, feeling isolated at home and at school meant that counselling staff at school were their main system of support for dealing with self-harm and suicidal behaviours. The pathway from school counsellor to social services was critical for these youth and when school counsellors actively supported youth through the referral process young people reported that they learned how to manage their needs and feelings in more positive ways.

For many of the young people, addressing their self-harm was a significant challenge that required them to allow other people to enter into their darkest thoughts, and this was frightening for them. They discussed feeling as if no one would understand why they were self-harming and the dark thoughts that accompanied these behaviours. As Ryan pointed out, they were often too scared to tell others about what was happening for them. Drew noted that she did not want to have a relationship with a service provider, as she felt that her self-harming was a controlled way for her to deal with her emotions. However, once Drew started talking to a counsellor, she found that the relationship was helpful in providing her with an alternative means of managing her emotions:

I enjoyed talking to her, I could tell her something and she wouldn't judge me… She gave me a little book and said 'when you are feeling depressed, write what's happening and why you want to [self-harm]'. That's what stopped me [self-harming].

Drew's experiences are salutary because they remind us that practitioners may need to persevere in gentle, supportive ways while young people come to terms with their involvement in services and build confidence that this support will be helpful. For many, being able to talk to a service provider about their self-harming or suicidal behaviour was a relief, and they no longer felt isolated. However, many struggled to access these relationships due to the stigma associated with having mental health issues.

Rhiannon
One young woman who found it challenging to establish a trusting relationship with support workers was Rhiannon. Like other young people, Rhiannon had found that her self-harm provided her with a sense of control over her circumstances, and found it challenging to engage with services about this:

It [self-harm and attempted suicide] was a way for me to control things… my way of escaping from everything… I had a few friends who I trusted and talked to, but they never really found out what I was doing… Whenever someone talked to me about it I would cut them off and say 'I can control it myself'.

She felt that being involved with mental health services would lead to her being stigmatised by others in her life. As such, she engaged with the service conditionally, only telling them some aspects of her self-harming behaviour and suicide attempts:

I just didn't want it to be official… I didn't want the stigma… I felt

if they [service providers] actually said it, then it would be real...
for everyone else... I'd tell them [service providers] the basic
things, but nothing major that would have made them feel
worried about me.

Young people like Rhiannon found it challenging to seek help for their self-harm and suicidal behaviour; often they had experienced adults who were not able to provide them with suitable support in the past, and thus did not believe that anyone could help them. The young people also worried about what other people would think about them if they knew that they were self-harming.

The narratives young people offered about their experiences of self-harm and suicide revealed the complexity of these behaviours. Young people like Drew, Ryan and Rhiannon engaged in these behaviours for a range of reasons. These young people's stories represent those of other young people in the study who shared their experiences of self-harm and reported that such behaviours provided them with a sense of control over their circumstances and a way of dealing with extreme adversity and intense emotional pain. The circumstances that led to the young people engaging in self-harm and suicidal behaviour were varied, but common features included feeling isolated, unsupported and afraid. Often, the young people had recently experienced something traumatic, such as the death of a loved one, or increasing tension in a problematic relationship. Self-harming and suicidal behaviours were challenging for the young people to address, as it required them to allow another person to hear their experiences, many of which were painful to talk about; it required them to feel confident that talking to a professional would help. Confidential support that allowed time to build a trustworthy relationship was effective for the young people in the study. These services provided a range of resources not available in youths' own lives and practical, positive coping strategies were particularly valued

by the young people.

Young people as leaders and mentors

Through the interviews, the young people were able to talk about many positive aspects of their behaviours. They noted that these dimensions of their behaviours were often not seen by the adults in their lives. Young people viewed themselves as leaders when they took responsibility for their decisions and had the opportunity to influence their service involvement. Not every young person had the opportunity to display this type of leadership; many felt that they were unsupported to influence their service involvement or circumstances. However, the young people who did have the opportunity to make decisions about the interventions put in place to support them felt that this enhanced their engagement with services, encouraged them to behave responsibly, and provided them with a chance to move away from labels such as 'troubled' or 'delinquent'. For example, Selina, who faced a range of challenges at home and at school, felt that no one in her life viewed her as responsible or gave her a chance to be a leader. However, when she moved into an alternative education programme she was given opportunities to mentor other students and demonstrate leadership.

Selina
Throughout her involvement with alternative education, Selina began to act as a mentor for the younger students at her course. She supported them to make positive decisions about their drug and alcohol use, attending courses, and about other aspects of their lives that were challenging:

> *People that are struggling...I try to help them, 'cause I know how things are, especially for the youngest at [alternative education course]. I try to talk to them, but they always think*

they are cooler [than me]... Don't lie, I know deep inside you're like 'please help me'.

Selina's course tutors began to view her as a leader amongst her peers, and Selina felt that her role as a mentor was valuable, both for herself and for her peers. This influenced the way that she engaged with child welfare services, who were also involved with her life. Selina felt that she was able to have input into the decisions that were made about her placements, and this further encouraged her to view herself as a leader:

> *I told them that I wanted to move back with my [family/whānau member]. There were heaps of people who were doubting it, they were saying if you go back there you will be on the streets, you're not going to complete anything... I just proved them wrong by graduating [from my alternative education course]... It felt like the main reason I was pushing myself with working is 'cause I wanted to prove all those who were doubting me wrong, show them that even though I have an ugly past I can still make it.*

Selina found that being able to influence her placement with her family/whānau provided her with the motivation to continue to achieve at her course. For young people like Selina, being viewed as a leader and being given opportunities to actively shape decisions made about them by the adults in their lives provides opportunities for growing self-confidence and the capacity to make responsible decisions about their behaviours. When provided with opportunities to be an active partner in interventions or to take on leadership roles youth report that they feel a sense of responsibility to those who are encouraging them to do well. Young people who viewed themselves as leaders also felt motivated to behave in positive ways to prove to the adults in their lives that they deserved to be viewed as
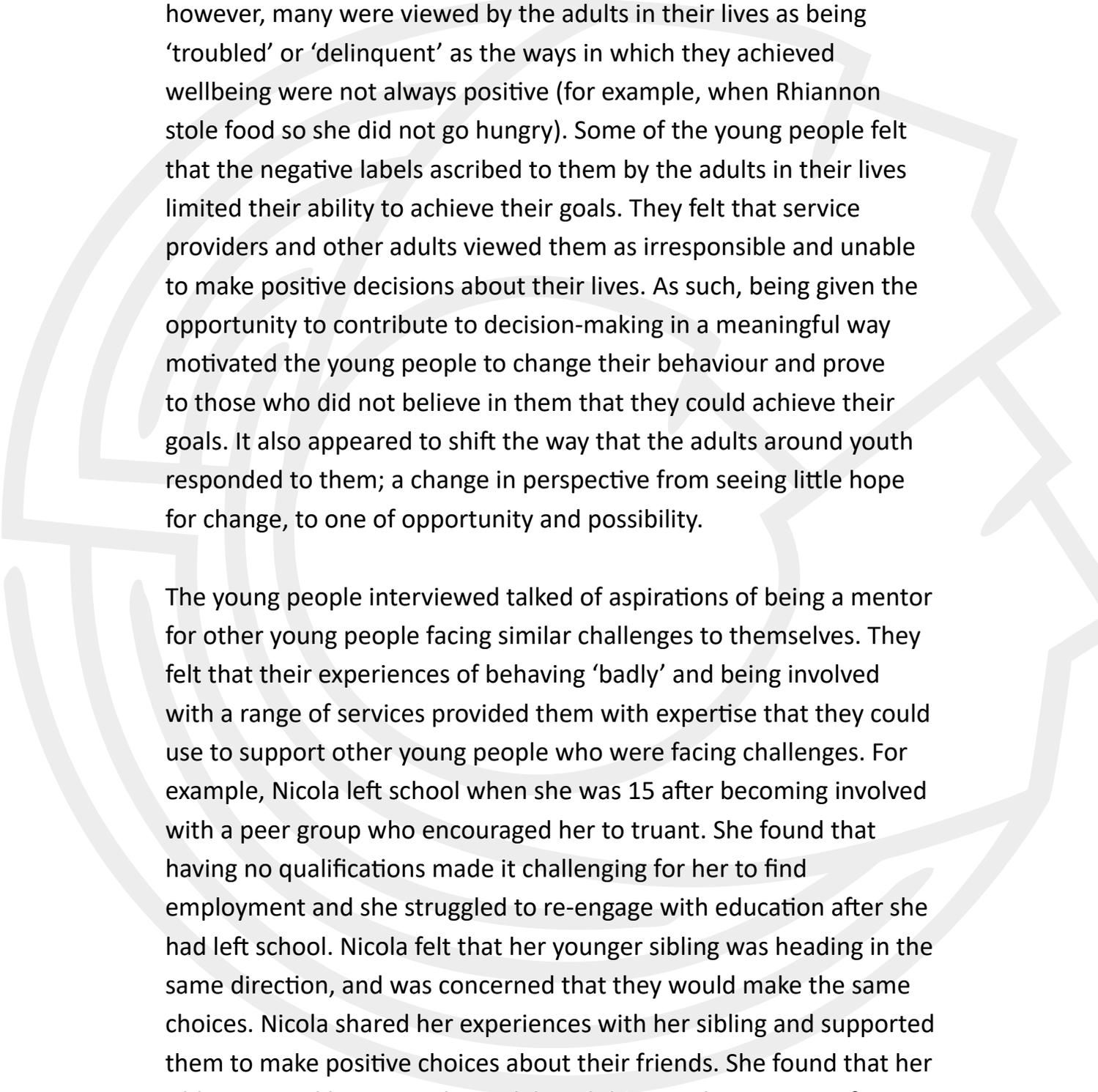
responsible young people. These young people were often already making a range of decisions regarding their wellbeing for themselves; however, many were viewed by the adults in their lives as being 'troubled' or 'delinquent' as the ways in which they achieved wellbeing were not always positive (for example, when Rhiannon stole food so she did not go hungry). Some of the young people felt that the negative labels ascribed to them by the adults in their lives limited their ability to achieve their goals. They felt that service providers and other adults viewed them as irresponsible and unable to make positive decisions about their lives. As such, being given the opportunity to contribute to decision-making in a meaningful way motivated the young people to change their behaviour and prove to those who did not believe in them that they could achieve their goals. It also appeared to shift the way that the adults around youth responded to them; a change in perspective from seeing little hope for change, to one of opportunity and possibility.

The young people interviewed talked of aspirations of being a mentor for other young people facing similar challenges to themselves. They felt that their experiences of behaving 'badly' and being involved with a range of services provided them with expertise that they could use to support other young people who were facing challenges. For example, Nicola left school when she was 15 after becoming involved with a peer group who encouraged her to truant. She found that having no qualifications made it challenging for her to find employment and she struggled to re-engage with education after she had left school. Nicola felt that her younger sibling was heading in the same direction, and was concerned that they would make the same choices. Nicola shared her experiences with her sibling and supported them to make positive choices about their friends. She found that her sibling viewed her as a role model, and this gave her a sense of confidence that she had not previously felt.

For other young people, leadership was a status they could obtain by being the 'toughest' in their peer group. These young people felt that no one would support them to meet their needs, and that they could only rely on themselves. These young people had often experienced adults who had let them down and they often felt abandoned. They found acceptance and confidence through becoming involved with gangs or peer groups who supported their view of themselves as leaders. One young person who felt this way was Dylan.

Dylan

Dylan had become involved with youth justice services after committing a series of crimes with his friends. He recalled that being involved with criminal activity made him feel in control, and that it helped him to forget about the challenges he was facing at home, due to the adrenaline rush he felt when he was not caught. Dylan was placed in a residential placement in an effort to support him to change his behaviour. He felt that he earned the respect of the other residents through being 'tough':

> *Nobody fucked with me 'cause I was the crazy one… In [residential placement] I was a soldier.*

For Dylan, being a 'soldier' meant representing the gang he was involved with in all his interactions with other residents. However, while the adults in his life viewed this as negative and troubling behaviour, as it often meant that he behaved violently towards other young people, for Dylan it represented being a leader and being respected by his peers. He recalled feeling powerless when the adults in his life made decisions about his life with labels such as 'delinquent' and 'dangerous young person' in mind. He adopted the label of a 'soldier' as a way of overcoming the negative connotations associated with the other labels being ascribed to him

(Bottrell, 2007).

For the young people in the study, leadership was displayed in a range of ways. Some young people viewed themselves as leaders when they were able to support others to make positive decisions or had input into the service interventions that were activated around them. Other young people viewed leadership as a status to be achieved through being 'tough'. However, the young people who felt this way had often experienced a range of people and circumstances that had made them feel powerless; they had learned from experience that the only way that they could overcome this sense of powerlessness was to take control, often in a way that was viewed as dangerous or troubling. This is similar to how the young people who felt that it was 'me vs the world' understood their behaviours and circumstances. It was important that these young people were supported to access alternative systems of support through their involvement with services and through their family/whānau and community interactions to support them to develop a positive sense of self-confidence and identity and to use these leadership skills in pro-social ways. The next section addresses how young people were supported by their families/whānau and service providers to develop positive strategies for meeting their needs.

Finding strategies for changing behaviour

One of the central goals of social service interventions is to support young people to develop positive, healthy identities because these are the foundations upon which successful adult lives are based. Interventions that encourage young people to feel in positive control of their circumstances facilitate the achievement of positive outcomes. In the interviews, young people explored the types of service approaches that were most effective in supporting them to confront their negative behaviours and develop strategies for

changing these. Punishment was a common response to difficult and challenging behaviour. This was actioned through formal mechanisms such as placement in a youth justice residential facility, community service, curfew, reparation, expulsion from school or discharge summarily from the service. Some service providers were able to see that the behaviours of the young people were an indication of deeper problems. These service providers took time to discover the story behind the behaviours of the young people, and worked alongside them to develop a means of addressing the underlying reasons rather than just focusing on the presenting problems.

The relationships between young people and service providers were central to the success or otherwise of service interventions. Young people who behaved 'badly' in order to receive attention discussed how they struggled to trust adults to help them, while at the same time wanting the support of their workers. This paradoxical experience of both wanting and not wanting a relationship with a worker or other adult was often reflected in their behaviours. For example, they acted in ways that would legitimate their request for help by ensuring that the worker was the one to initiate the relationship due to the concerning behaviour. Selina shared her story of seeking help through unconventional means. She felt that her requests for help would be ignored if she simply asked, and so bullied other students at school to draw attention to her needs. This allowed Selina to feel that service providers were initiating the relationship. This was important for Selina, as her previous efforts to form supportive relationships with her family had been rebuffed.

Selina

Selina's home environment was complex. Many children and adults lived in her house and she was often left to her own devices. This occurred from as young an age as seven, and Selina resented this. She felt that she was not getting the attention or love that she needed

and desired. To deal with these feelings of rejection Selina looked for attention in negative ways:

> *Honestly I was so naughty [at school] aye, I was fricken naughty like, when I look at it now, 'cause I used to hate it when people used to say, you're an attention seeker and all that, I of course I was an attention seeker back then 'cause I never used to get the attention that I wanted at home, you know. I tried to find it at school by bullying you know, and all that like be the loudest and all that stuff. I never used to like show my feelings, I used to show them in a rough way, you know. And I just always wanted to fight and all that.*

Selina's challenging behaviour at school led to her being excluded and becoming involved with alternative education. At her course, she found a tutor who she was able to connect with; the tutor initiated this relationship. After talking to the tutor during a lunch break, she felt she was able to trust this tutor as they had shared similar experiences growing up. Selina's relationship with this tutor allowed her to open up about the hurt and frustration she was experiencing due to her problematic relationship with her family. Once Selina found that she was able to talk to her tutor about her feelings, her behaviour started to improve. Along with this, Selina found a sense of self-confidence that she had not felt before. Having a positive relationship with an adult who respected her as an individual person of worth was a key motivator for Selina. The relationship with her tutor supported Selina to develop a positive identity and she felt empowered:

> *I never actually saw myself here aye, I thought I was going to be a low-life like [some of my relations], everyone was saying I was gonna end up like them but I'm actually happy I'm not aye… I mean I still back down and still doubt myself and still look at*

the past and all that, but I always pick myself up and try move it to the next level aye, yeah I think I'm like proceeding well, more than I could have been before.

For some young people, forming a positive attachment to an adult figure and finding a role-model was enough of a motivator to engage in a change process. These young people found the means of accessing the support and resources they needed to make positive change, through having a relationship with someone who believed in them and encouraged them to do their best. It was critical that the adults who were in these relationships did not give up on the young people when they experienced a set-back, as this only served to reinforce the idea that adults are not a reliable source of support. Relationships with workers that were empowering and respectful allowed the young people to explore their sense of identity in a safe environment. They ensured that the young person felt supported to make changes to their lives, and they helped model to the young people what was involved in a positively functioning social relationship. The relationship also provided a framework for working through inevitable set-backs that occurred as young people worked to make big changes to their circumstances.

Another important aspect of being able to make positive behavioural changes was centred around the circumstances of the young person allowing them to be in a 'place' in their own minds where they were 'ready' to change. The following case example introduces Nathaniel. Nathaniel's story reflects a difficult journey towards managing an addiction to drugs and alcohol. Nathaniel found that in order to make positive changes in his life, he had to separate himself from the negative influences in his home life.

Nathaniel
Being placed in a residential facility was one of the key experiences

that helped Nathaniel turn his life around. Having been exposed to drug and alcohol use for the majority of his life, Nathaniel began experimenting with drugs when he was 13 years old. He began stealing to fund his addiction, and as a result, became involved with youth justice services. During the course of his Court appearances, he was offered a choice between going to a residential facility for his drug addiction or completing community service hours. Nathaniel chose to go to the residential facility, which provided support in withdrawing from the drugs and alcohol and also in developing a range of strategies that would help him stay away from drugs and manage his alcohol intake in the future.

During his time in residence, Nathaniel was in a secure and stable environment. This enabled him to address some of the emotional factors behind his drug use in an environment where he felt safe. Nathaniel was able to explore the impact his living circumstances had on his ability to maintain the positive changes he had made during his time in residential care. Once he started to trust the workers in residence, he found that they provided support to him to address these challenges and think about establishing more positive support networks once he completed his residential programme. The decision to establish different networks of support post-discharge helped Nathaniel realise that he had the agency and power to make other positive changes. He talked with his support workers and set a range of goals for his future, which supported his journey towards becoming drug free. In his interview, Nathaniel noted that this choice was one of the factors that helped him to stop fighting against the approach of the workers in residence. It prompted him to examine his choices with regard to his rehabilitation; he decided that he wanted to commit to getting better so that he would not have to return to the residential environment.

Being in residence provided Nathaniel with the confidence to say 'no'

to behaviours he knew were unacceptable. Through working alongside the staff in residence, Nathaniel was able to decide that he wanted to make choices that were going to benefit his future, rather than simply making decisions to feel good in the present. The stability of both the environment in residence and the relationships with the workers allowed Nathaniel to develop coping strategies, which he was able to continue to use following his release from residence.

Nathaniel experienced set-backs in his progress after his release from residence. For example, he decided to binge-drink with his peers one weekend. However, he realised that his decisions while he was drinking were not positive and he was disappointed in their outcomes.

The ability to continue on a positive path away from heavy drug and alcohol use had its foundations in the lessons Nathaniel learned while in residence. It also stemmed from his ability to analyse his choices and his determination to change his life. During his time in residence, Nathaniel and his workers developed a set of goals together for his future; this was another contributing factor to his ability to make positive decisions. Importantly, Nathaniel's community social worker maintained weekly contact with him throughout his time in the residential programme, even though it was some distance from his home. Nathaniel decided that he wanted to go back to school. Having this goal in his mind helped Nathaniel to make positive decisions around his education and social life:

> It's like being a man, being responsible, being an adult, and growing up. It's sort of what I'm doing now. Every time I feel crap I think 'nah, I've got to hang in there to be a man. Do what I have to do, what is best for myself, follow my goals and follow my dreams'.

It was common for young people like Nathaniel to resist entering a residential or rehabilitation programme. Initially, they acted in ways that were contrary to the behaviours service providers find acceptable, in order to feel that they still had control over their lives. However, once the young people formed a trusting relationship with a worker and separated themselves from their external circumstances, they found that they were in a mental 'place' where they could engage with the programmes. The home circumstances played a significant role that impacted on their ability to be ready and able to change their behaviour. It could take some time for the influence of relationships and experiences from their community of origin to diminish so that they could be open to new ways of thinking about their lives. Many young people made an intentional decision to separate themselves from the 'chaos' that they experienced in their daily lives. When this occurred, these young people could begin to focus more intentionally on establishing long-lasting change.

Dylan

Another young person who recognised the importance of forming trusting relationships and feeling safe to address the challenges underlying his behaviour was Dylan. Dylan reflected that being involved with youth justice services and spending time in a residential facility gave him the opportunity to address some of the reasons underlying his anger and violent outbursts. Participating in a programme that provided him with the opportunity to explore his emotions and previous experiences in a safe environment allowed Dylan to '*get to know [himself] more*':

> *I'm noticing that my decisions are impacting other people… [Before], it was just me thinking about my reputation and just not dealing with things, not talking about it to anyone.*

Another important factor that enhanced young people's ability to

make positive changes was on-going support once services stopped working intensely with them. The following case example introduces Jesse. Jesse's story illustrates how young people were able to make positive changes when they had ready access to the support and encouragement of service providers and other adults. However, as Jesse found, young people often struggled to maintain those changes once they returned to their home environments, or once workers scaled back their intervention.

Jesse

Jesse became involved with alternative education and youth justice services as a young teenager, after finding himself drawn into the delinquent activities of his peer group. Jesse was sent to a residential facility for two months after he committed an aggravated robbery with his peers. Following this, he spent time at an isolated, secure programme based on a military-style camp, designed to support him to remove himself from crime, drugs, alcohol and negative peer groups.

Spending time in residential care supported Jesse to begin to make positive changes to his life. Jesse recognised that his attitude towards risk-taking and his unwillingness to listen to his family's suggestions of new activities to occupy his time were having a significant impact on the path his life was following. Being placed in residential care, with strict rules and expectations around behaviour, gave Jesse a 'wake-up call', causing him to realise that he valued his freedom, and that his actions would have consequences for his future:

> *Jesse:*   *I am over it now, I realise that something is trouble and I try to walk away.*
>
> *Interviewer:*   *So what helped turn you around?*
>
> *Jesse:*   *Just being locked up really, made me look at how nice it was when I could go outside and*

do my own thing.

Despite this realisation, Jesse struggled to maintain positive behaviours. Whilst in residence, he repeatedly engaged in prohibited behaviours, such as smoking with the other residents. His reluctance to fully engage with the service provided meant that he was required to spend extra time in a military-style residential programme. He noted that the staff at this service were able to equip him with life skills such as learning to positively communicate and he learned other skills, for example, fishing, and cooking. Jesse's family were also key supports and provided him with access to the resources he needed to develop the skills to avoid getting into trouble again:

> *Interviewer:*   *So tell me about what [your family] do to support you?*
>
> *Jesse:*   *Everything, anything they possibly can. They ring around [to find services to support me], and they show me that it was hard on them too when I was getting in trouble.*

Recognising the impact his behaviour had on his family, combined with the support of his key workers and the wake-up call from being in residence and losing his freedom, provided Jesse with the motivation he needed to attempt to re-engage with education and turn his life around. This required significant perseverance from everyone involved, as Jesse struggled to maintain the positive changes he had made in residence. Upon his release from residence, Jesse indicated to his workers that he wanted to attend mainstream school again, rather than going to alternative education. He felt that it was important that his workers listened to his wishes and supported him to re-engage with his old school. However, once Jesse returned to his community, he found it very challenging to maintain the positive changes he had made. His attempted transition back into

mainstream education did not work for him and he found himself interacting with the same peer group who had led him into a delinquent lifestyle over a year earlier.

Throughout his journey, Jesse identified that his attitude towards offending and his home circumstances precluded his ability to sustain changes begun while in residential programmes and therefore he was unable to achieve any significant, lasting change in his behaviour. Jesse found that his behaviour started to improve during his time in residence; however, the transition from the highly structured residential environment into the relative freedom of the community was a significant challenge for him. He faced a number of setbacks, in the form of minor offences. Despite this, service providers and his family continued to support Jesse to do the best he could. With their support, he began to engage in a process of reflection. He reflected on his own attitudes and behaviour and on his readiness to listen to advice and accept help. Residential care laid the foundation for positive change but it required significant ongoing support once he returned home.

Interventions that paid careful attention to youth circumstances post-discharge and that actively involved youth in thinking about and planning for this time increased the capacity of youth to sustain positive behaviour change in the medium and long term. In particular, when practitioners supported youth to identify and develop relationships with adults and peers who could provide young people with the positive emotional resources they required to achieve a sense of wellbeing, such as a sense of identity, acceptance and belonging, youth were able to draw on these resources once the intervention was complete. While old relationships had provided the young people with a sense of power and belonging, they did not support positive changes in behaviour. When an intervention provided the young person with the skills to separate themselves

from these negative influences and to develop strong relationships with pro-social peers, they were more able to sustain the positive changes. Consider, for example, Shawn's experiences. He was encouraged by his friends to help with an armed robbery and sent to a youth justice residential facility as a result of this. Following his release from residence, Shawn was placed with caregivers in a different town. While Shawn felt disappointed at not being able to return to his previous peer group, he recognised that forming relationships with a new, more positive peer group was a critical part of the plan to stop offending.

Young people who were supported by service providers, their family/whānau, and their peers to build relationships that would facilitate changed behaviours noted the importance of having a goal and a sense of direction and the support to keep working towards this even when there were setbacks. Having something to aim for and hope for gave the young people motivation to keep trying to make changes. Additionally, some young people found that once they started to see the outcomes of their positive changes, continuing to make changes became easier. For example, Ethan found that making positive changes to his behaviour for a short time made him feel better about himself, so he committed to making long-term changes:

> *The staff [at my education course] are good. They taught me how to work things out… I hadn't had a single fight [in a few weeks] and I thought 'well I've been this long without a fight, so why do I need to fight? Why can't I just walk away?'… You walk away and you feel like the bigger man. You haven't punched him and you're not in trouble… When I get older I want to be a professional [sportsman] so I can get a book out and say 'I went down the wrong road' and people who want to play sports can read my story and know they can do it too.*

For the young people in the research, finding strategies for changing their behaviours required a significant amount of reflection, commitment and ongoing support from others. Having access to supportive adults, having a goal, holding hope for the future and having realistic plans about how to manage themselves after interventions were complete allowed these young people to work towards achieving positive change.

Discussion

The young people in the research shared a range of narratives about their behaviours. These narratives allowed us to explore how the youth understood their behaviours and how adults in their lives responded to these. For many of the young people, behaviour was one means by which they could regain a sense of control and power over their circumstances. Young people learned through experience that their behaviour showed that they were not happy with the decisions that were made about them. These behaviours were often considered by adults to be 'undesirable', 'delinquent' or 'troubling'. It was often difficult for young people to articulate their needs and concerns verbally, and they faced challenges in building trusting relationships with adults. Often, the adults who observed the troubling behaviour of these young people were not able to see the story behind the behaviours. Responses to these behaviours were generally focused on the observed and acute behaviour and the underlying causes of this behaviour were not fully understood. These episodic responses did not address the chronic nature of young people's circumstances. For many of the young people, their behaviours were a response to these chronic, unmet needs. When they experienced adults who would not or could not meet their needs, this affected their attachment to other people. They learned that they needed to rely on themselves to cope with the challenges of life. They found it hard to trust professionals, as they saw all adults

as unable to help. These young people used behaviours like bullying, committing crimes, or using drugs and alcohol, as a means of meeting their needs for things such as food, money, identity, control, and attention.

Young people in the research who made positive changes to their behaviour identified a wide range of factors that supported them to achieve this. Young people said that the things that were important were having trusting relationships, reflecting on and addressing the underlying causes of behaviours, developing supportive social networks, having hope and a sense of direction for the future and having realistic plans regarding management of challenges post-discharge and access to support to deal with these challenges. These factors highlight the ecological nature of the change processes these young people engaged in and the need for support at a number of levels. Such approaches require services, caregivers, communities, and the young people themselves, to engage in processes that recognise the underlying reasons for the behaviours and to identify strategies for achieving positive change.

Looking for alternative explanations

For many of the young people, adults punished their 'bad' behaviour, as was the case for Claire. However, if service providers had explored alternative explanations for Claire's 'bad' behaviour, they may have seen that she was not just running away from caregivers, she was running to be with her grandfather out of concern for his wellbeing. Re-framing 'bad' behaviour to understand the purpose it serves for a young person can require practitioners to suspend their judgement about the young person and their behaviour, work alongside them, take opportunities to develop trusting relationships, and understand that young people are experts in their own lives (Ungar, 2004, 2007). Understanding the behaviour from the perspective of the young
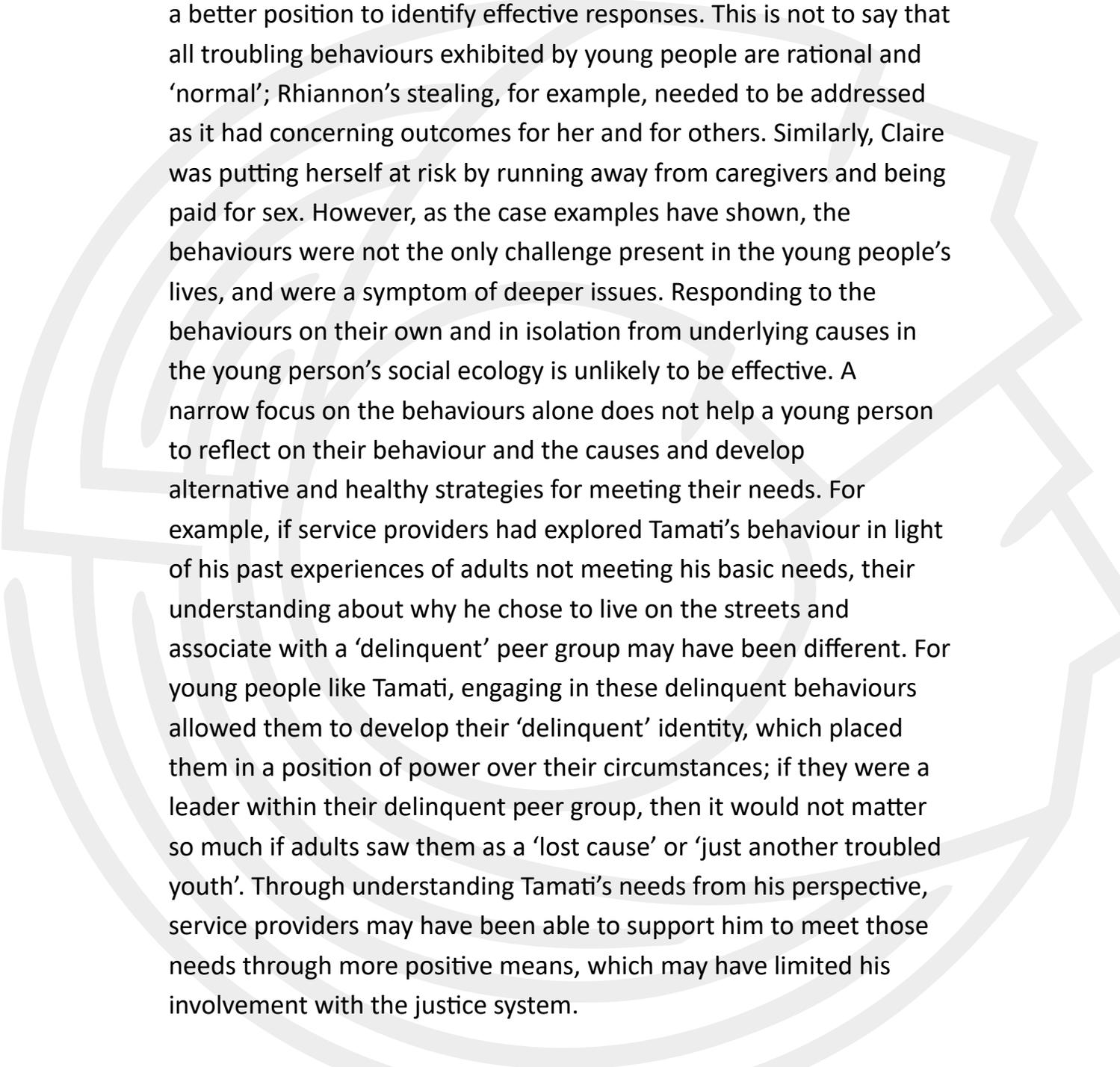
person can allow service providers and other support people, such as family/whānau members, to see the logic of the behaviour and be in a better position to identify effective responses. This is not to say that all troubling behaviours exhibited by young people are rational and 'normal'; Rhiannon's stealing, for example, needed to be addressed as it had concerning outcomes for her and for others. Similarly, Claire was putting herself at risk by running away from caregivers and being paid for sex. However, as the case examples have shown, the behaviours were not the only challenge present in the young people's lives, and were a symptom of deeper issues. Responding to the behaviours on their own and in isolation from underlying causes in the young person's social ecology is unlikely to be effective. A narrow focus on the behaviours alone does not help a young person to reflect on their behaviour and the causes and develop alternative and healthy strategies for meeting their needs. For example, if service providers had explored Tamati's behaviour in light of his past experiences of adults not meeting his basic needs, their understanding about why he chose to live on the streets and associate with a 'delinquent' peer group may have been different. For young people like Tamati, engaging in these delinquent behaviours allowed them to develop their 'delinquent' identity, which placed them in a position of power over their circumstances; if they were a leader within their delinquent peer group, then it would not matter so much if adults saw them as a 'lost cause' or 'just another troubled youth'. Through understanding Tamati's needs from his perspective, service providers may have been able to support him to meet those needs through more positive means, which may have limited his involvement with the justice system.

The young people's narratives suggest that at times, young people did not intentionally behave 'badly', and they could not always say why they were acting in particular ways. Their experiences of meeting their own needs meant that the behaviour became an

automatic response to obtain what they wanted and needed. The long term risk here was that these then became learned behaviours that were functional for them. It took a lot of reflection, effort and support for young people to understand their behaviours and make a change. As Isabelle's case illustrated, forming relationships with trusted adults supported them to achieve this reflection and change.

The importance of relationships

The young people's narratives of their behaviours and attitudes reflected the centrality of relationships in their lives; relationships shaped how young people viewed themselves, understood their experiences, and how they responded to the challenges that they faced. Many of the young people recalled feeling isolated by their experiences, as these often set them apart from their peers; however, through building positive relationships with support people such as service providers and other adults, and with peers who had similar experiences and who also wanted to confront their challenging circumstances, the young people were better placed to make positive changes to their behaviours, build a sense of self-confidence and hold hope for the future.

Relationships with peer groups

Relationships within peer groups were important to the young people in the research. Peer groups provide young people with a sense of identity and belonging (Ungar, 2004). This is not always achieved in a positive way; many of the young people in the study recalled finding acceptance and belonging with their peers by engaging in dangerous or troubling behaviour, such as stealing, vandalising property and truanting from school. Building a sense of identity contributes to young people's ability to navigate a successful pathway through adolescence in a range of ways; feeling secure in one's sense of self buffers experiences of adversity or change (Chen et al., 2012; Ungar,

2004). Behaving 'badly' often allowed the young people to establish a place where they felt they belonged within their peer group; they felt accepted and part of a larger whole. This helped them overcome feelings of isolation, especially when they were dealing with challenges that made them feel ostracised from other friends or their family/whānau.

The young people in the study were often labelled as 'delinquent' or 'dangerous' due to their behaviours. However, within their peer groups they were able to adopt labels such as 'tough', 'soldier' and were seen as leaders and mentors. Through establishing relationships with peers who encouraged anti-social and dangerous behaviours, the young people were able to resist the negative labels that were ascribed to them by many of the adults in their lives (Chen et al., 2012; Neary et al., 2013; Ungar, 2004). On the other hand, being viewed as a leader or mentor within their peer group provided some young people with a sense of self-confidence and acted to encourage them to behave positively with support from friends and adults. Young people like Selina and Grace felt that they had a responsibility to act as a role model for younger people experiencing similar challenges; taking on leadership and mentoring roles enabled these young people to manage and address their own behaviour and challenges.

The young people in the research felt that their friends were the most valuable supports; they provided the young people with someone safe to talk to, and supported them to develop a sense of identity and belonging. The relationships young people had with their peer groups could also be paradoxical, as their peers encouraged 'bad' or 'dangerous' behaviours such as substance use, criminal activity and truanting from school. Relationships with anti-social or deviant peers can increase the risks that young people face in their already complex lives (Neary et al., 2013). The young people in the

study who associated with peer groups that encouraged 'bad' behaviour required significant support from formal service systems and other adults in their lives to make positive changes to their behaviours. As Selina, Grace and Nicola illustrate, on-going support from service providers and family/whānau members was central in enabling young people to sustain positive changes and continue to develop a sense of belonging.

Relationships with service providers and other adults

Young people's experiences of changing their behaviour reflected the importance of forming positive, trusting relationships with service providers and other support people. Forming trusting relationships with young people allows service providers and other support people to gain insight into the reasons underlying young people's troubling behaviours. If young people, like Damon and Isabelle, felt that those supporting them were listening to their perspectives and accepting them, they were more likely to actively engage with the support person and share their experiences. For many young people, forming positive relationships with adults was a challenge, due to their previous experiences of adults not being a reliable presence in their lives. Young people felt that it was important that adults who were supporting them did not give up on them when they had difficulty in staying on track with their plans. Nathaniel and Jesse illustrated the importance of having someone to continue to support them when their behaviour became challenging. This reinforced the idea that adults could be trusted to be a reliable support, and also gave the young people a sense of confidence that if someone else believed in them, they could also believe in themselves (Munford & Sanders, 2014; Ungar, 2004).

Building trusting relationships was of central importance when the young people were self-harming or behaving in other dangerous ways. For many of these young people, relationships with service
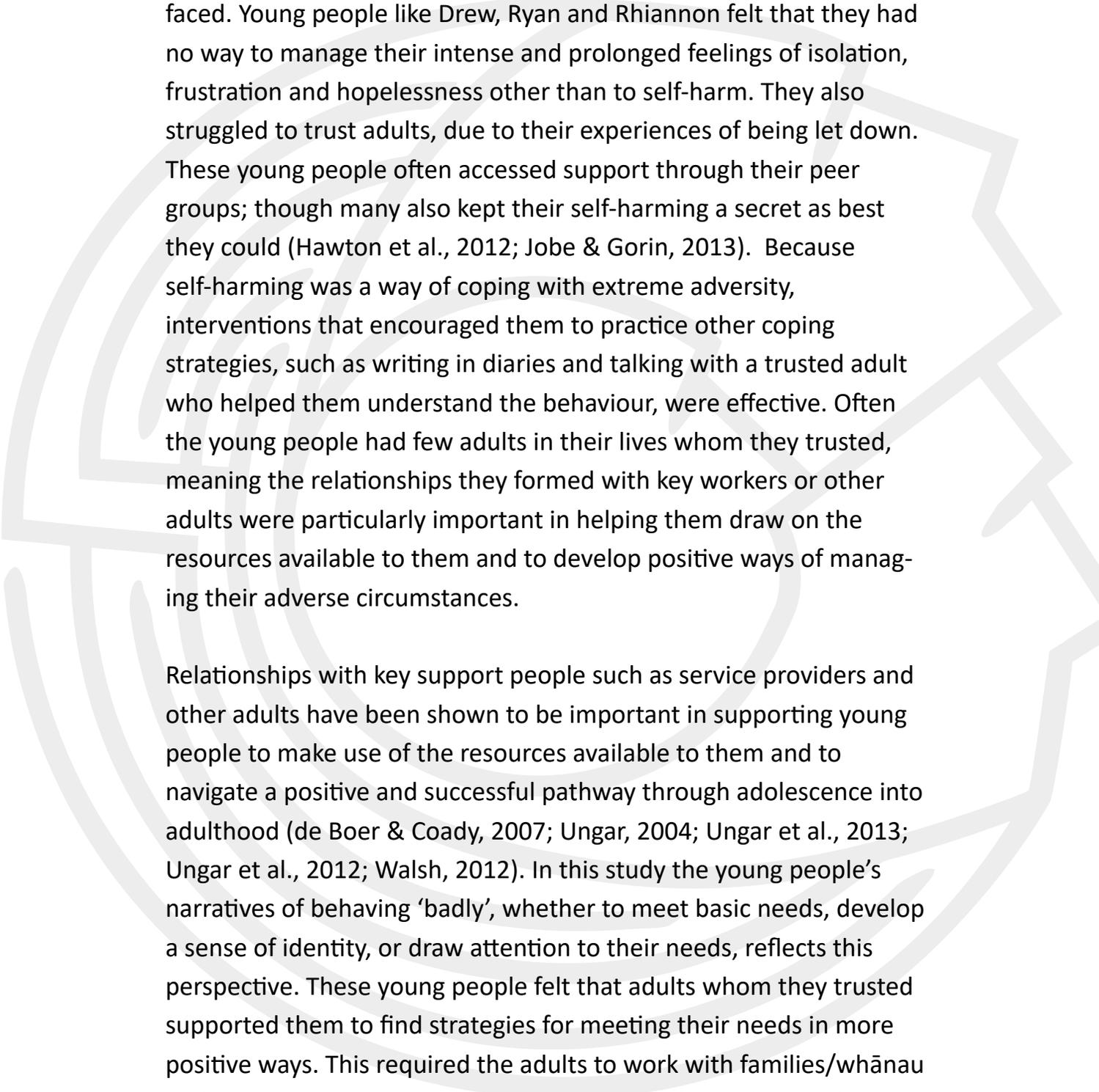
providers and other support people provided a way of accessing alternative supports and strategies for managing the challenges they faced. Young people like Drew, Ryan and Rhiannon felt that they had no way to manage their intense and prolonged feelings of isolation, frustration and hopelessness other than to self-harm. They also struggled to trust adults, due to their experiences of being let down. These young people often accessed support through their peer groups; though many also kept their self-harming a secret as best they could (Hawton et al., 2012; Jobe & Gorin, 2013). Because self-harming was a way of coping with extreme adversity, interventions that encouraged them to practice other coping strategies, such as writing in diaries and talking with a trusted adult who helped them understand the behaviour, were effective. Often the young people had few adults in their lives whom they trusted, meaning the relationships they formed with key workers or other adults were particularly important in helping them draw on the resources available to them and to develop positive ways of managing their adverse circumstances.

Relationships with key support people such as service providers and other adults have been shown to be important in supporting young people to make use of the resources available to them and to navigate a positive and successful pathway through adolescence into adulthood (de Boer & Coady, 2007; Ungar, 2004; Ungar et al., 2013; Ungar et al., 2012; Walsh, 2012). In this study the young people's narratives of behaving 'badly', whether to meet basic needs, develop a sense of identity, or draw attention to their needs, reflects this perspective. These young people felt that adults whom they trusted supported them to find strategies for meeting their needs in more positive ways. This required the adults to work with families/whānau and communities to encourage young people to 'hook in' with a more pro-social world. Adults who provide positive support to young people need to make a long-term commitment to them; this requires

that they listen to youth and involve them in decisions about service interventions. This results in strategies that are relevant and tailored to the young person's circumstances. It also encourages young people to experience a sense of positive control over their circumstances. Making behavioural changes requires on-going support at all levels of the young person's social ecology. Where informal supports are scarce, social workers and others can work alongside young people to help them to navigate to and negotiate for these resources (Ungar, 2004).

Conclusion

The young people in this research engaged in a wide range of behaviours in response to the complex and risky circumstances they experienced. Many of these behaviours were problematic or dangerous and were labelled as delinquent. The adults around them often failed to make sense of these behaviours. However, through listening to the narratives of the young people, it was possible to see how they used their behaviours to tell their stories and to bring their circumstances and needs to the attention of others: these are stories of survival, resilience, coping, and feeling powerful.

Some of the young people shared narratives that showed that they needed to behave in certain ways in order to meet their basic needs for food, money, identity and acceptance. These young people had experienced difficult relationships with adults who could not meet their needs, and as such developed ways of meeting their needs on their own. While their 'bad' behaviours initially met their needs, this often escalated until it was beyond the control of the young person, and became automatic responses the young people used to get what they wanted and needed.

Other young people behaved 'badly' to seek attention from those
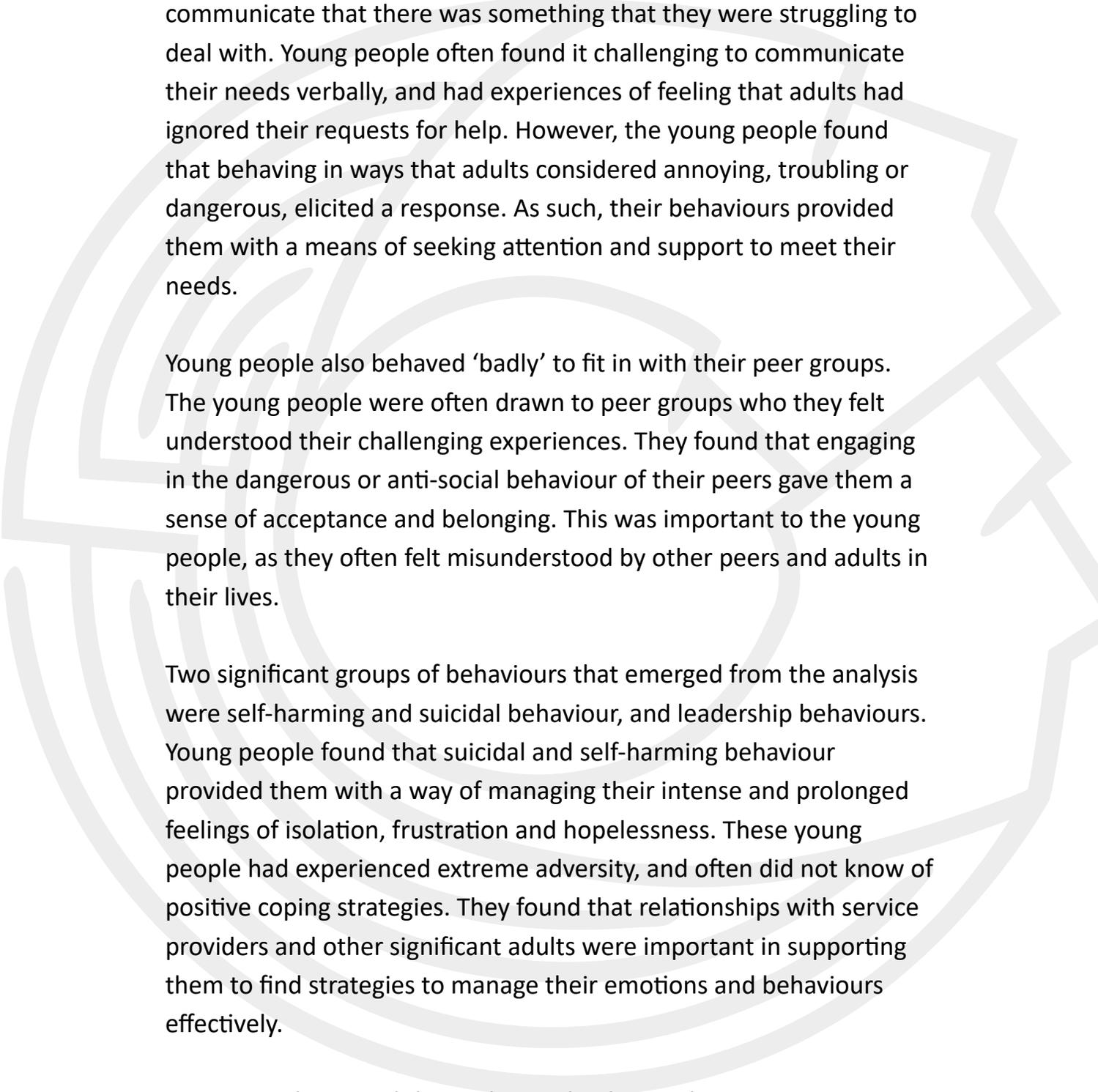
around them. Through behaviours such as bullying, being uncooperative and aggressive, these young people were able to communicate that there was something that they were struggling to deal with. Young people often found it challenging to communicate their needs verbally, and had experiences of feeling that adults had ignored their requests for help. However, the young people found that behaving in ways that adults considered annoying, troubling or dangerous, elicited a response. As such, their behaviours provided them with a means of seeking attention and support to meet their needs.

Young people also behaved 'badly' to fit in with their peer groups. The young people were often drawn to peer groups who they felt understood their challenging experiences. They found that engaging in the dangerous or anti-social behaviour of their peers gave them a sense of acceptance and belonging. This was important to the young people, as they often felt misunderstood by other peers and adults in their lives.

Two significant groups of behaviours that emerged from the analysis were self-harming and suicidal behaviour, and leadership behaviours. Young people found that suicidal and self-harming behaviour provided them with a way of managing their intense and prolonged feelings of isolation, frustration and hopelessness. These young people had experienced extreme adversity, and often did not know of positive coping strategies. They found that relationships with service providers and other significant adults were important in supporting them to find strategies to manage their emotions and behaviours effectively.

Young people viewed themselves as leaders and mentors in a range of situations. Many shared aspirations of using their experiences to support other young people to make positive choices about their
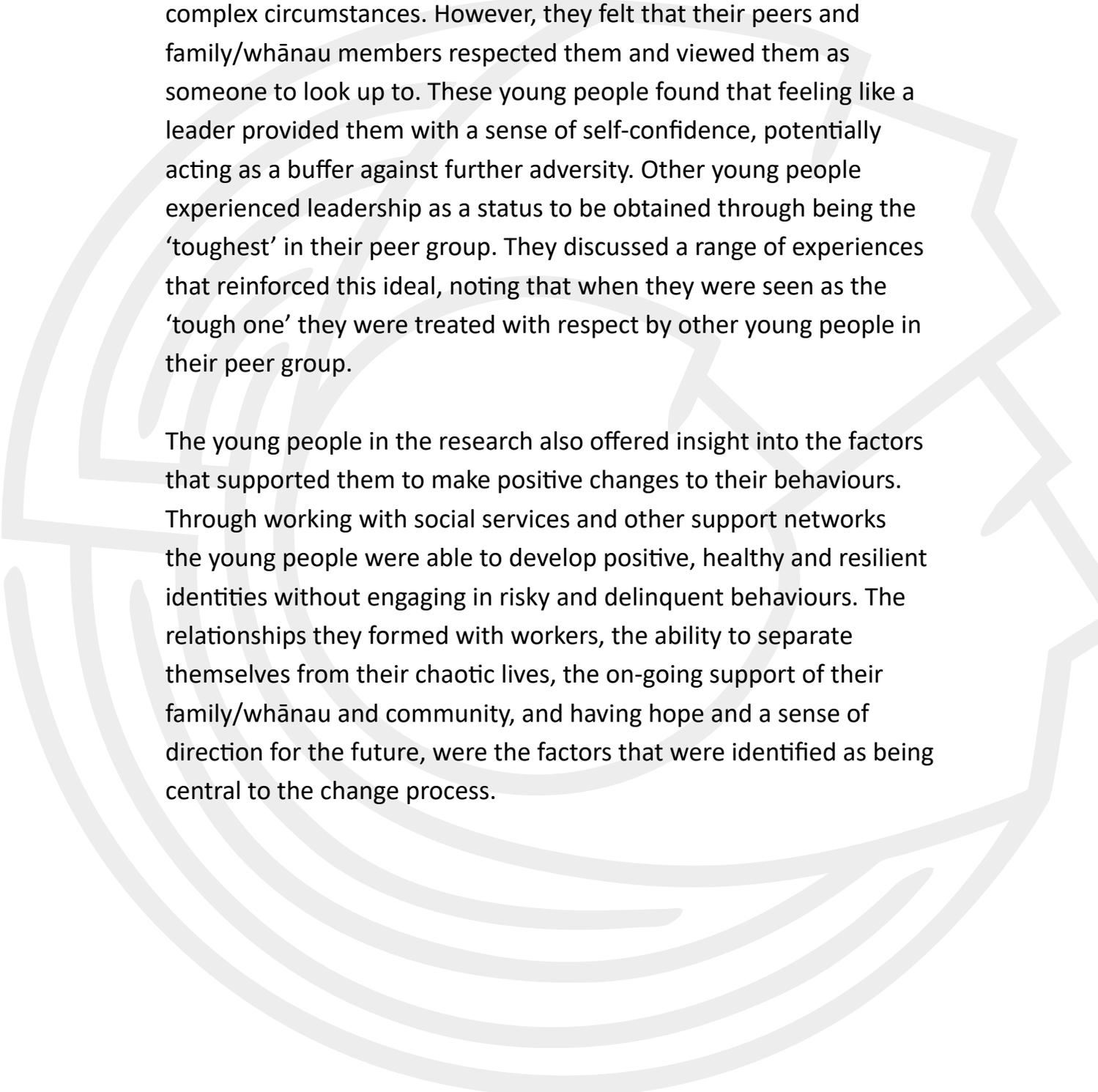
lives. These young people reflected on feeling like they had made mistakes and had experienced a wide range of challenging and complex circumstances. However, they felt that their peers and family/whānau members respected them and viewed them as someone to look up to. These young people found that feeling like a leader provided them with a sense of self-confidence, potentially acting as a buffer against further adversity. Other young people experienced leadership as a status to be obtained through being the 'toughest' in their peer group. They discussed a range of experiences that reinforced this ideal, noting that when they were seen as the 'tough one' they were treated with respect by other young people in their peer group.

The young people in the research also offered insight into the factors that supported them to make positive changes to their behaviours. Through working with social services and other support networks the young people were able to develop positive, healthy and resilient identities without engaging in risky and delinquent behaviours. The relationships they formed with workers, the ability to separate themselves from their chaotic lives, the on-going support of their family/whānau and community, and having hope and a sense of direction for the future, were the factors that were identified as being central to the change process.

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