



Background of students
in Alternative Education:
Interviews with a selected
2008 cohort

**Report prepared for Ministry of
Education**

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Executive summary

This report presents the findings from a research project carried out in 2008 on the educational histories and pathways of alternative education (A.E.) students in New Zealand.

Alternative education students are ‘at risk’ students from between the ages of 13 -16, who have been truanting for more than two school terms or who have been expelled from mainstream schools, and are now receiving an alternative form of education in AE centres in the community. There are approximately 3,400 alternative education students attending 200 centres throughout New Zealand in 2008. Most of these centres are situated off the school site, but are the responsibility of the host secondary school to which they are legally attached. Many are also supported by community trusts.

Fieldwork was carried out in June 2008 in the form of one-to-one interviews with 41 AE students at five A.E centres in four urban and one rural centre across the north and south islands.

Participants’ educational histories and pathways, their personal histories as they have impacted on their education, their strengths, and future hopes and aspirations were discussed in the interviews. In addition, an advisory group of 9 AE students were consulted on the proposed research design, questions and methodological approach before the interviews were carried out, and again after analysis of the interviews to check on interpretations of the data. The questions were piloted in one local centre and adjustments made before the fieldwork commenced. In total 50 AE students were involved.

The focus of this research was to document the “voices” of alternative education students, because there is no research in New Zealand that records their points of view about their educational experiences. The students’ stories capture four main aspects of their lives and educational experiences:

- How students have experienced learning in their schooling so far;
- The nature of their educational and social experiences in A.E. centres;
- The impact of their health, friends, and family life experiences on their learning; and
- What students consider to be their strengths, and aspirations for the future.

Key findings:

- All of the students (100%) interviewed at the AE centres in our study, told us that they enjoyed being at AE and 95% said they enjoyed learning again, since attending AE.
- Most students (75%) had become disengaged with learning at secondary school (most in their first year). Many had been seriously disengaged.
- A minority of students (25%) had begun to disengage at intermediate school.
- The main reasons for disengagement at the secondary school level appeared to be firstly that students reported teachers as not knowing them or developing effective relationships with them, and secondly because there appeared to be a mismatch between their levels of achievement and teaching levels. In all cases where students identified the mismatch, the level at which teachers were teaching was too high.
- Many of the young people were aware of their learning needs and were proactive in asking teachers for support, but reported not receiving it.
- The study points to an ‘engagement’ gap appearing well before secondary schools become aware of students’ lack of presence (extended truancy).
- The one-to-one help they were receiving from the AE tutors was helping them re-establish their confidence in their ability to learn and increasing their optimism and beliefs about their future.
- Almost all students had enjoyed learning at primary school and had achieved reasonably well there.
- Many students with learning delay or behavioural disorders believed that they had received effective interventions at primary school. However, their difficulties were such that curriculum adaption was likely to be required throughout their schooling for them to remain engaged and successful learners. This appeared not to be happening after primary school.
- Several students who received counselling help at mainstream schools had found this to be unhelpful. Counselling without attention to the school factors that create or exacerbate learning problems is unlikely to be successful.
- Most of these students have experienced problems in their family lives (violence, drugs and alcohol, gang connections, disorganisations and disruption, CYFs interventions, poverty, sexual abuse, etc).
- Some students described more ‘normal’ family circumstances, but identified peer pressure (including gang involvement) as the reason for getting into trouble.
- Most students demonstrated great strength and resilience in negotiating their personal circumstances, and now that they were with AE tutors who worked with them as people first, and learners secondly, they described how they have turned their previously negative attitudes around.
- Once students join alternative education there appear to be limited processes and structures for them to return to mainstream secondary schools. They appear to be “lost to the system” and there are inherent inequities in having a separate system rather than investing in developing the capacity of secondary schools to teach all of their students successfully. Having a separate

system, while providing a lifeline for disengaged students, adds nothing to the capacity of schools to learn more effective ways of engaging challenging students.

- AE appears to be successful in restoring these young people's sense of self-confidence and belonging, but this study provides little evidence that students in AE are leaving with the qualifications they require to be successful in the next stage of their lives. For 61% of the students, their AE centres were not sufficiently resourced to provide the catch-up learning they believed they needed.

1. Introduction

This report provides the findings from a research project carried out in 2008 by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), for the Ministry of Education (MOE) on the educational histories and pathways of alternative education students from different regions in New Zealand,

Alternative education (AE) students

Alternative education (AE) students are "at risk" students aged between 13 and 15 years (inclusive), who have become alienated from compulsory schooling, through truanting for more than two school terms or from [multiple] exclusion from mainstream schools. Most are now receiving an alternative form of education in AE centres in the community, while some are receiving it in secondary schools. [Up to 20% of AE students do not need to be verified as meeting the AE criteria and AE placement decisions are left up to the professional opinion of the managing school] .There are approximately 3,400 alternative education students attending 200 centres throughout New Zealand in 2008 . Most AE centres are situated off the secondary school site, but are the responsibility of the host [enrolling] secondary school to which they are legally attached. Many are also supported by community, church and/or Māori trusts.

According to a Ministry policy document Alternative Education is defined as:

"...a distinct form of education that was introduced in 1998 for young people who have become "lost" or alienated from the education system. For these young people there is either no access to an alternative learning centre (such as an activity centre), or they have already bypassed that sort of opportunity. Some may have been enrolled in The Correspondence School as the "school of last resort" but have not kept up their work, and have dropped out".

The purpose of this research project is to inform on-going policy development of alternative education, by providing the students' points of view about their experiences of their educational pathways and personal histories. This is achieved by considering participating AE students' thoughts, reactions and feelings about:

- how they have experienced learning in their schooling so far;
- the nature of their educational and social experiences in A.E. centres;
- the impact of their health, friends, and family life experiences on their learning; and
- what they consider to be their strengths, and aspirations for the future.

Methodology

Research team

The NZCER research team of three was made up of Keren Brooking (research leader), researcher Ben Gardiner and clinical psychologist Sarah Calvert. Keren and Ben are both ex-teachers, and Sarah works with troubled youth, CYFs and the Youth Justice system.

Research Design

Individual open-ended interviews

A qualitative methodological approach was used to collect data for this research, using open-ended interviews with individual students. The researchers visited five AE centres and conducted up to three one-to-one student interviews at each centre for a total of 41 interviews. They also met with a student advisory group (see below) on two occasions—before and after the fieldwork. Digital recorders were used to tape the discussions.

Initial assumptions about AE students

In thinking about this student cohort when designing the methodology, we were aware that two of us in the interviewing team had no direct prior experience of AE students¹, so we designed a number of “just in case” ideas and activities based on assumptions we had about these students. For instance:

- we assumed some may not have long enough attention spans to talk to us for an hour in a typical one-to-one interview situation, so we designed an interactive time-line activity for them to do, or doodle at, if they liked—complete with paper, pens, stickies, etc.
- we assumed that some may not be comfortable with eye-to eye contact, so we would sit beside them to interview instead of across from them.
- we thought some might not want to talk to us at all, because why should they? We were total strangers coming in for an hour, wanting them to tell us all about their lives. As an incentive, we arranged to give each student a \$30 Warehouse voucher for their time.
- we were also aware that our dialogue may raise sensitive issues which had the possibility to be harmful for some students, which is why, for ethical reasons, we included a clinical psychologist on the team. We also told students they held the power—to tell us only what they wanted to.

¹ Dr. Sarah Calvert – the clinical psychologist on our team did have a great deal of experience interviewing these students, particularly those involved with the Youth Justice system.

Student Advisory Group

Because of our uncertainty about this student cohort, we also invited a group of AE students from the local Challenge 2000 AE centre, to advise us on our ideas, plans and questions. We visited their centre and held a focus group with them before the interviews started. We tested our ideas and questions on them and then asked them to reflect on what they had done and give us feedback on our processes and questions. They did this very willingly and with some good ideas (see Appendix B), which we incorporated into our later interviews.

At the end of our analysis we took our findings and interpretations back to this group to check for further interpretations and explanations. The students supported and agreed with all of our findings and interpretations, but added further insights to some aspects, which we have incorporated into the document, recording these students' contributions.

Pilot interviews

We piloted our approach, questions and interview techniques with another local centre (Lyriks in Naenae) and amended some aspects as a result. The main changes we made were to begin our conversation with questions about their AE experiences—at the end of the time-line, and go backwards, rather than our previous approach, which was to go forward from birth to AE. This made more sense as the students had a better memory of their recent past compared to their earliest memories, and talked more freely as a result.

Dispelling our myths about AE students

Our experience at the pilot centre began the process of dispelling the myths and assumptions we had about these young people, and by the time we had finished the interviews, we realised:

- students had no problem concentrating and talking to us for an hour. Only three students in total did anything with the interactive time-line. Two tagged the whole piece of paper, (one was used as the cover for the report), another decorated hers with all available stickies, (see Appendix C), while the rest just sat and talked.
- most students managed the eye-to-eye contact very comfortably, but a few were shy and sat talking and looking ahead. We did maintain the sitting alongside them in most cases, as that felt right.
- students enjoyed talking to us, were very keen to do so, and in fact fought (literally) to do so. One boy had had a temper tantrum at one centre before we arrived, because he had not been chosen in the first group, so he was included in the second round. One girl said: "I was so excited to come here to talk to you. This is only the second time I have ever told anyone my story" ('Naomi'²). They really valued the vouchers, but were not always aware they were getting them before the interview. A girl from one centre said to her friend: "This voucher is mean-as! I'm not going to work—I'll just do interviews at \$30 an hour!" ('Pink'). Three students at one AE centre, who had not arrived for the morning, turned up in time for their interviews as a result of their friends' texting them.

² Not her real name. We asked students to make up a fake name.

- we did not need to call on Sarah (our psychologist) to intervene with the handling of sensitive issues, but were pleased with our approach of giving the students the power and decisions about what they told us. Sometimes students said ‘I don’t want to talk about that’ when describing parts of their lives or troubles, but in the main we were humbled by their trust and the sincere honesty of their revelations. Students described their own violence, alcoholism, family troubles, drug taking, gang behaviour, stealing, trouble with the police, and so on in quiet self-controlled, matter-of-fact conversations.

Benefit of including clinical psychologist on interviewing team

It was extremely helpful having Sarah Calvert on the interviewing team, particularly because of her clinical background working with troubled youth. After each round of three one-to-one interviews we would de-brief as a team, and she would extend our understanding and knowledge, in areas such as: the background circumstances and reasons for students’ acting-out behaviours; gang networks; the drug scene; family circumstances; and CYF and Youth Justice procedures. This helped provide us with the bigger picture and a more meaningful context for understanding these young people. A pertinent example, where my own understanding was enhanced was after I had interviewed a very wary, anxious girl who told me just before we finished the interview, that she had her own way of calming down when depressed. I asked what that was, and she said “I slit my wrists”. I had assumed that self-harm of that nature was a cry for help, but Sarah explained: “Oh no, it’s like the Medieval blood-letting—they calm themselves right down by releasing blood”.³

The research questions

We co-developed the research themes with the Ministry of Education, (see Appendix A), but asked questions in our conversations as they arose in the most natural sequence according to the story being told. While we covered the main themes, each interview was different because some themes required more or less depth, depending on the participant’s experiences. The research themes and questions have been organised in the table below to give some insight into what was covered.

³ Self harming or self mutilation releases endorphins (naturally occurring opiates) so making the individual feel better. There are also other complex reasons why people do it, and it is commonly associated with experiences of trauma.

Table 1 **Overview of interview themes and questions**

THEMES	QUESTIONS
Family	Tell me a bit about your family.
Family structure, stability and wider support	Who is in your family and where are you in the order of children? How do you get on with your parents, brothers and sisters? Do your parents work? Have they always? Do you see a lot of your extended family? Location: Where have you lived? Urban/rural (<i>Check stability of family situation</i>)
Family support of student's learning	How do family members describe you when you were little, e.g. happy, shy, talkative, energetic, curious, mischievous, "naughty", etc? Did you go to any kind of pre-school? Have family members helped in your learning? (<i>Heard reading, encouraged them, been interested, helped with homework, talked to them about school, gone to parent evenings at school, etc</i>) (<i>If relevant</i>) What do your parents think about you wagging school?
A.E.	How did you come to be here?
Circumstances that led to student's alienation, and how the transition was managed.	What did you feel when you were told? What did other people think (parents, friends)? How was the decision made, what were you told, and who stood up for you? Was it a good decision from your point of view?
Effectiveness of AE for these students	How do you feel about the staff, and the kind of things you do here (learning and other activities) How is being at this centre different from school? Are your needs being met here? Are you learning more here? Is the learning more to your style?
Compulsory schooling	When did learning become difficult or boring for you?
Primary, intermediate and secondary schools	Was it at primary, intermediate or secondary—or did it happen when you transitioned from one to another? How did you feel about that? Did you like primary/int./sec. school? Why? What did you like learning and were good at? Interventions: Did anyone help you to do the work better? (<i>Teacher aides, special one-to-one help, reading recovery, GSE, behaviour, counselling, etc.</i>) What would you have liked people to do that they didn't? Teachers: Can you remember a teacher that you really liked / didn't like? (<i>Prompt for reasons</i>) What do you remember as the best / worst things about school? (<i>Which sector?</i>)

Health	What can you tell me about your general health as a kid growing up?
	<p>Can you remember anyone ever telling you about being sick as a young child? (<i>Colds, ear infections, glue ear, allergies? ADHD?</i>)</p> <p>Can you remember having health checks done at school—ears, eyes, injections, etc.</p> <p>Did you go to the doctor often as a child?</p> <p>How healthy do you think you are now?</p> <p>Have you taken any substances, like smoking, drug taking, sniffing glue, alcohol? Do you think you might have risked your health by taking these?</p> <p>Do you suffer from depression, anxiety, anger problems? Acting out behaviours?</p>
Friends	Tell me about your friends
Confidence and sociability	Was it easy to make new friends at each school? Why do you think your friends like to hang out with you?
Peer pressure, peer networks, bullying	<p>How did your friends feel about school? Did they ever do things at school that got them into trouble, or you into trouble? (<i>When, what?</i>)</p> <p>What did the teachers do when you got into trouble? What do you think they should do to help kids when they get into trouble?</p> <p>What sort of things did you do with friends <u>after</u> school? Did you ever get into trouble with your friends? How supervised were after-school activities?</p>
Strengths	What are the things you are good at?
Self esteem and resilience	<p>How do you know? (Who tells you?)</p> <p>What things are you most interested in?</p> <p>What do other people see as your strengths?</p> <p>Have you ever taught anybody these things?</p> <p>What would you like to be doing more of if you could?</p> <p>How do family and friends react to these things? Supportive or not?</p>
Future Aspirations	What are your dreams and goals for the future?
Check how positive they are about the future.	<p>Who would you like to be like? (<i>Role models: Who do you look up to—who are your heroes?</i>)</p> <p>What would you like to be doing in the next few years? (<i>Are they even thinking about 5 years ahead, or just next year? Going back to mainstream school?/ Getting further experience for a job?</i>)</p> <p>Do you dream about what you would like to be as an adult? (<i>Leading to adult occupation choices, type of lifestyle they would like in their 20s, etc.</i>)</p> <p>Where do you want to be—here or somewhere else?</p> <p>Are there things you know you <u>don't</u> want to be doing as an adult? <i>Check how much control they feel they have over their future.</i></p>

AE student participant sample

The Ministry helped us select the participants for the interviews, because they knew which centres in which parts of the country were most likely to match with the participant sample range we wanted to represent. We wanted as much diversity as possible in terms of ethnicity and gender, but which most closely represented the AE national cohort⁴, and an urban / rural mix. The following two tables show the gender and ethnicity of the national population of AE students, and the group in the research project.

Table 2 **National cohort of AE students by ethnicity and gender (2006)**

Ethnic Groups		Percentage (n=3412)
Māori		62
Pākehā		26
Pasifika		10
Other (Asian, European)		2
Gender	Male	65
	Female	35

Table 3 **AE students in sample by ethnicity and gender (2006)**

Ethnic Groups		Percentage (n=41)
Māori		51
Pākehā		24
Pasifika		24
Other (Asian, European)		0
Gender	Male	59
	Female	41

The proportions of AE students interviewed did not match the national figures exactly but were somewhat representative of the national cohort.

Over the page Table 4 shows the gender and ethnicity breakdown of participants interviewed at each centre.

⁴ Ethnicity and gender of AE students by managing school for 2006 (ministry of Education database)

Table 4 **Participants at AE centres**

Centres	Boys	Girls	Māori	Pasifika	Pākehā	Other ethnic group
Urban	4	2	5	1	0	0
Urban	7	2	5	4	0	0
Urban	4	5	4	5	0	0
Rural	4	4	7	0	1	0
Urban	5	4	0	0	9	0
Total	24	17	21	10	10	0

Consent and Ethics

We sent our letters of invitation with introductory information and consent forms to each AE centre chosen, and the managers handed them out to students and parents. It was important to have both students' and parents'/caregivers' consent and we found it helpful for staff who knew the students' situations to approach the right people. In some cases these were social workers.

For ethical reasons of confidentiality we asked each student to choose a pseudonym for the project. Most were quite happy to use their own name, but for our original reasons we have made up names for the quotes we have used, where students did not provide a pseudonym.

Data analysis

Transcripts of all interviews were analysed for themes related to the research questions, and the research team wrote summary reflections from them. We then looked for the larger patterns of behaviour, responses to questions and reasons for the alienation from schooling that these students had in common. There were both commonalities and differences, representing the diversity of these students.

We have applied a two-pronged approach to our analysis of the data, and present arguments that draw on two quite different but complementary frameworks to produce more nuanced interpretations of these students' lives and educational experiences—a psychological individual approach, and a sociological ecological approach (Terrisse, 2000). Most of our data revealed several factors at play at the same time—factors to do with the individual child, factors to do with the parents, care-givers and family, factors related to the schools and neighbourhood, and factors related to the broader social and economic conditions and context. We have taken as a given that this cohort of students is 'at risk' in the way Levin (2004, 6) uses the concept, and as he explains:

Another important change in thinking about risk has been an increasing awareness of the complex way in which vulnerability is related not just to characteristics of the student, but to the relationship between children and their environments. As Wotherspoon & Schissel (2003) put it,

Increasingly, the concept [at risk] has expanded from one based on presumptions of deficit of the learner (a medical or psychological model) to encompass sensitivity to the educational, home and community environments of children's and youth's development (a sociological model). (p323).

This sensitivity draws our attention to a broader range of factors that are related to risk. In so doing it also makes the task of understanding risk more complex.

This theoretical framework therefore does not allow for the easy option of blaming—of either the student, the parents or the schools, but it does enable an examination of some of the underlying issues, assumptions and structural barriers that are at work here. While blaming is not productive, our approach here is to present a balanced view of the data from the students' perspectives. Blaming people or institutions implies a deficit view, which is less productive in our view than looking at situations from a strength based approach.

Constraints and advantages of the data

While it could be argued that one of the constraints of the data we gathered was that it was self-reported, and not triangulated by teachers' and parents' responses, this was the very reason for doing this research. The student voice had not been heard before, and it was important to hear this without the bias of others' interpretations of student behaviour. This data does therefore add to the reliability of the bigger picture of student alienation from schooling. The interviews were all done separately, so there was very little likelihood that students would imitate or copy-cat answers, yet we found remarkable similarities with students' responses to many questions. This in itself adds validity to our findings.

The authenticity of the students' stories could be queried. It could be argued that the students fabricated aspects of their stories, giving false information, and that we would be none the wiser if they had. This could be true, and yet difficult to substantiate. What we found in the main were experiences related that were far from boastful or fanciful, in fact starkly realistic and with too much accurate detail to have been fabricated. Throughout the interviews we took opportunities to subtly revisit aspects of the students' stories to check for consistency or add further detail. Some were openly frank about family and personal circumstances that most people would be hesitant to admit to for fear of being judged. Sometimes the stories skirted around the edges of a life-style difficult for the interviewing team to imagine. In these instances the impression was that students were exercising their right to tell as much or as little of the story as they felt comfortable with. Always though, the story was constructed in the way the student wanted to tell it. The biggest advantage of that was the insights it gave us as listeners, about the general level of optimism, resilience, control and self-belief the students had about their lives. Again coming from a strength-based approach in our questioning, we 'heard through the bad stuff' and didn't react in judgmental ways. These students did not subscribe to the dominant deficit discourse about themselves as many in schools and society view them. They had their own stories to tell and seemed happy just to be listened to.

Overview of the report structure

This report records AE students' lives and educational stories as they were told to us in the hour allocated. Every single story was unique, as would be expected, but there were also many similarities in experiences and circumstances in these young people's lives. In this report we have clustered experiences that were similar together in loosely woven threads or themes, but we have interspersed throughout them, students' comments and mini-vignettes (succinct captured descriptions or summaries) which help to show the uniqueness of the individual stories.

The main themes form the chapters of the report and consist of:

- Chapter 2: Students' whānau and families;
- Chapter 3: The influence of violence in students' lives;
- Chapter 4: The influence of gangs in students' lives;
- Chapter 5: Students' educational pathways and experiences;
- Chapter 6: Students' experiences in AE centres;
- Chapter 7: Students' strengths, future hopes and aspirations; and
- Chapter 8: Conclusions

At the beginning of the study, gangs and violence (chapters 3 and 4) were not identified as topics we expected to feature as we had not identified them as major influences. However, as we listened to the students' stories, it became clear that in many of their lives, violence—and gangs, particularly in boys' lives, were significant influences.

At the beginning of each chapter we provide a “profile” of the threads common to many of the students, and then we illustrate how these differently play out in their individual stories.

In the interviews we were careful not to judge what students told us, and in this analysis and re-telling, we have also attempted to avoid judgements. At times we use other studies to help explain or compare what we found, but we would like the reader to draw their own conclusions from what the students had to say about their families, school experiences, friends, hopes and aspirations.

2. Students' Whānau and Families

We found the majority of students told us that their families were struggling and experiencing various forms of hardship, and in many families there were multiple issues involved. Drug and alcohol issues, domestic violence, criminal/gang connections, frequent moves—both geographic and in living circumstances among family/whānau members, and general disorganisation of family function were described in many different ways and combinations. Often there were indications of poverty, however, only one student described her family as “poor”. There were three stories which hinted at or described sexual abuse, and several where CYF had been involved in removing children from their families for a number of reasons. So quotes such as: *"Kids ruin your life"*; *"They were useless parents"*; *"I didn't really ever have a Mum or a Dad"*; *"My family argued"*; and *"We were having a rough time (before I got into trouble)"*, were not uncommon.

On the other hand, what came through the stories most vividly, was that while students often recognised that their problems and issues were in some way related to family systems and behaviours, many showed high levels of connectedness to their families, and were often fiercely protective towards them. In fact, one of the most common triggers to the students' own violent outbursts was often as a result of their family (or friends) being disrespected or slandered by others (by both students and teachers). Some of the young people who came from the more ‘anti-social’ behaviour sets (such as families with connections to gangs) also tended to see that culture as the norm. Never-the-less, there were also stories of mothers, usually, and fathers, who had demonstrated great strength and resilience to keep their children out of harm's way.

An interesting finding was that while many families did not resemble the Anglo-Saxon model/myth of the two-parent and two-children structure, most were from intact families and whānau of all kinds of combinations of related people. Very few students came from single parent families, and where they did participants judged that the family now functioned more effectively than it had done when both parents had been present. However, even where these families were ‘intact’, many were struggling, with parents sometimes working long hours in shift work and employment, and children being sent away to live with relatives when things got tough.

In this chapter, the main aspects that resulted in hardship for families are illustrated from the students' own stories.

Children separated from their family

A third of the young people told us about how their behaviour had become increasingly disruptive and violent as a result of being removed or dislocated from members of their family. It seemed that no matter

how negative the family situation was, each student's story had a common thread which was that being separated from original family members was emotionally traumatising.

One traumatised young man in our study had just come out of 'lock-up' (Youth Justice centre) where he had spent a year for a criminal offence, which appeared to be set off by a series of decisions which separated him further and further away from his family. CYFs had removed the eight children of the family from their parents because his father was violent, when "**Jay**" was eight years old. All the children had been split up, and Jay went from foster home to foster home, all the time missing his mother, but at least having access to see her from time to time. The final foster-care family moved with him to Australia, which was the last straw for Jay and he "really freaked out being taken so far away from Mum". As a result of his behaviour he was sent back to New Zealand, and since being released from the YJ centre, has been living happily with his mother again.

Anglia was brought up by his grandparents after his mother had him at a very early age. He was sent to live with his mother, once she had settled down with a family of her own, and this removal from his 'first and known' family, seems to have been the trigger for his unsettling behaviour:

I lived with nan and pop for the first seven years of my life, then I went back to mum for a while but I didn't like it, so I came back to nan and pop and aunty. Mum lives in Waihi but I don't see her anymore—don't get on with her. Nan and pop are like my real parents. When I was little I used to cry heaps. I'd keep them up always crying when I was a little baby. My mum was too young to look after me when I was born. [Anglia]

Pink was taken away from her parents by CYF to live with her grandma for the last four years because her parents were both drug users. They are now both on the Methadone programme.

At the first school it was real hard—I was bullied for the first year and a half by heaps of kids, and the principal there hated me and wouldn't do anything about it, until my father came up, and then it stopped for a while, but then it started again. I started to stick up for myself and then I just went mental—lost it. I think I was bullied because our family was actually quite poor and I didn't wear flash clothes like the rest of them. I still got pretty fired up when I was living with my grandma. The thing that sparks me off is, if ever people insult my friends or scrap them out, or when they attack my family. But worst of all is when they say things about my mum...It was hard at the beginning to be away from my parents, but then I found I could see my parents a lot, and then at the end it was hard because I knew I was going home, but the court took such a long time for all the papers to go through. But now I'm back home, things are fine. [Pink]

Will lives with his grandparents (mum's parents), because "dad hasn't lived with me since I was 7. When he left mum got depressed. She spends her time on the computer at home. We don't talk much." Will was an exceptionally bright student, but had been sent to AE for smoking drugs, fighting and wagging at secondary school.

Samantha lives with her dad and her little brother.

I ran away from home because of everything that happened. It was because my mum was sick. She was taking drugs. At my mum's place, I was beaten up by my mum's boyfriend a couple of times—he's big-as. When my nan found out, she looked after us, but then she didn't have enough money, she was on the benefit. Most of my primary years, I lived with my nan, we were always together...When I ran away from home (dad's place), I didn't come home for about 7 or 8 months, I stayed on the streets for 2 weeks, then stayed with a boy I met on the streets. I'm still with him today. I missed my family so much. It sucked. I thought if I went home, everything would just go wrong. Couldn't tell my dad that I was sorry—thought that he would be angry. But he wasn't, he was just happy that I went back home. He was worried about me all that time...When I was little, I was always happy, but when I grew up, I got quite quiet. I didn't really like my dad at first. I thought he was the one who took us away from my mum, but I've learnt that things weren't like that. I love my dad heaps. He's cool and he understands. Doesn't give me lectures like my mum. I miss my mum—worry about her all the time. She's too far away from me.

Jessica: “My mum was an alcoholic... So really, my grandmother brought me up. She lives just round the corner from my mum. I see mum every week. I didn't have a dad and mum, I just had my nana and sister. But when I grew up, I wanted to know my other family members like my father.”

Henry *has lived with a number of different family members, but is now living with his nana. He could see that how things were at home, influenced him at school. Most of his changes were due to the family moving around.* “Mum and Dad separated about 4 years ago. I've also got a step-mum and step-dad—they have had more kids plus the ones from the other families. I first got into trouble in primary school and was kicked out when I was about 8. This was when granddad died. I was just uncontrollable in the classroom. I haven't spoken to anyone about how I feel about granddad—I think that's part of why I've acted out at times. Granddad was really special and we had a connection that I don't really have with the rest of my family...I was under CYF care due to my behaviour—for about 5–6 months in 2007, before being placed with Nana. I had been living with my mother in Rotorua before this, but got into an argument with my step-dad and it went from there...CYFs wouldn't let me go back to live with Dad. I sometimes visit mum—not too often though. See dad every second weekend and stay there during the holidays and get on fine with both mum and dad. Me and my nana have our ups and downs though”.

Whitebait : “My family is me, my brother, my little brother and dad. My sister lives locally too. Mum lives with her partner. I don’t see her much, she’s not really connected. Parents split up when my dad was 24/25. I was about 4. I’ve had times with mum, we’re not allowed to stay with mum. When dad was in jail, we used to get into trouble and she told dad and he rang CYFs, and they told us we couldn’t see her. She doesn’t care what we do. She’s not really a mum, she’s like a stranger. Dad is more like a dad, sort of. Mostly when dad was in jail, I was at boarding school—when I was around 12 years old.”

Nate now lives with his foster family.

“Since the start of the year, I don’t live with mum. CYFs organised for me to live with my caregiver and three kids, all hers. I get along alright with them. One is one year older than me and the rest are older. They go to school locally. They’re good to me, cool. My older sister is one year older and she has the same situation, she’s living some where else. Don’t really care about seeing my family. I feel closer to my mates. Dad was trying to help out with the situation, but I didn’t get along with him. It’s easier to talk to the caregiver, she treats me the same, and gives me a grounding when I get into trouble.”

Bruce was the most forthright of the students about his feelings of being let down by his parents:

“I live with my auntie—eight family people live there. Mum and dad live in the next town. They are useless parents—not so much my dad. My mum doesn’t deserve my respect. She needs to straighten up and open her eyes and smell the roses. She makes up excuses for people to give her money and then she goes and spends it on alcohol for her and her new boyfriend. My parents are not living together. I don’t talk to people here about it—don’t like talking about it. I used to get on OK with my mum. When I was getting into trouble, mum and dad tried to sort my troubles out at school, but they were having things going on at home with fighting their hearts out”.

Family Connectedness

These stories resonate with another study of AE students in New Zealand (Denny, Clark, Fleming and Wall, 2004) where 268 AE students from Northland completed a survey on emotional resilience. In this study it was found that:

The school, family and socioeconomic environments of AE students are as important to their welfare and well-being as more obvious concerns about their safety from abuse and violence. Students from our study described strong family caring and connectedness and strong peer support and school connection. These findings are noteworthy in that few studies have described protective factors among students at risk of not completing high school...We also found that in multivariate models, family connectedness, compared to school and peer connections, was the most significant protective factor and was more significant than individual risk factors. (ibid. p.146)

Influence of significant drug and alcohol use in the home

There were some students who told us quite explicitly that their families did not take drugs or drink alcohol. These were more likely to be Pacific Islands students. One Tongan girl said:

I've got a really supportive family—I love them. We all attend the Tongan church—every Sunday we have to go to church. My parents are strict with me—they have real strict boundaries for us—no boyfriends til I'm 21. They don't want us to drink or smoke and I don't. Lots of other kids at Course do. I don't mind the other kids doing it. I don't mind hanging round people who do it, but I don't want to. My parents don't have it in the house [Naomi].

However, nearly 40 percent of the students in our study mentioned the significant use of drugs and alcohol in their family homes, and how this factor had influenced their own uptake of these substances. This figure is probably underestimating the reality in fact, as we only counted the students who had offered this information freely. In several interviews where there was discussion about family gang connections, there was not always direct reporting by the students of drugs and alcohol in that setting, yet we believe this was highly likely to be the case.

For many students, an environment where drugs and alcohol are freely used was considered quite normal. Mere explains this normalising of behaviour when she says:

My family still takes drugs, it was what I thought was normal. I got brought up around it, but it's not good because it influences me and my sister and we smoke drugs, drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes. No-one ever talked to me about this before I got to AE. Dad uses drugs—don't know why we started. He stills smokes drugs but tells me not to. I'm getting sick of it now—wastes my time. I'd rather watch TV or sleep. Don't want to smoke drugs when I'm grown-up. [Mere]

In her interview when she was asked how she became a bully, Jessica answered:

I don't know... when I was a kid, I used to see a lot of alcohol and violence so I think that's what I knew—all I knew. I still drink alcohol to this day, but I started not liking marijuana because I've seen the side effects of it. My dad was a hard-out drug user and now he's not well. I think I stopped because of that. It wasn't hard to stop. I just did it [smoked] to be cool. [Jessica]

The following statements from a sample of students illustrates how widespread this issue is in these students' lives, and how it relates to their own substance abuse.

Mum's on the methadone programme and Dad has just come off it—they both used to take drugs. I smoke cigarettes and I drink sometimes at a friend's house. If we go to a party we drink spirits and my mum gets it.[Pink].

Mum and dad have smoked dope and drink right through since I was little [Bruce].

I do heaps of drugs with my friends. I've smoked dope and drunk alcohol since the end of primary. Dad smokes dope but mum doesn't and she doesn't let me do this at home. I still get drunk and stoned with my friends in the weekend. [Tweety]

Dad was Black Power and I was with him all the time—I watched him with drugs. It was fun but drug people are not fun. Have you seen “Once were Warriors”? It was like that. Mum brought us here to get away from the gangs. Mum was frightened because my brother started getting into drugs and alcohol. Mum stayed away from it and wanted to get us away from it. [Genius 1]

I don't want to be a dope fiend (smoke pot). Seen the effects in my family. It addles and controls the brain and mind. Also expensive—\$20. Crazy aye? [Robert]

There's not much drinking at home but I smoke every day and drink every few weekends—and get pissed—there's no point in drinking and not getting pissed, because that's just a waste of alcohol. [Superman]

Two students had been involved with highly risky behaviour around alcohol and drugs. Their stories hint at deeply seated problems which they were not prepared to share in an hour to a stranger, but which can be glimpsed at.

Rose described herself as being an alcoholic at primary school. She tells her story in her own words:

When I was young there was my mum's ex- boyfriend. There was yelling. It's hard getting over the fact that I was the victim—I had troubles with mum's ex-boyfriend when I was a kid. It was hard to function, but I don't want to talk about it. I think it was his alcoholism. I got to be an alcoholic at the age of 12 and that was because I was trying to get rid of all my troubles. I started hurting my mum, but I don't want to talk about it. My family doesn't smoke dope or drink—except my stepfather, to control the pain in his leg and back after his heart attack. He is addicted but he's quit smoking.

My mum, my boyfriend and the Salvation Army helped me get over my alcoholism. I was an alcoholic for 2 years—I was drinking every day in the first year—I wouldn't stop until I'd binged. I was shaking—automatically—my mum noticed I had a problem. I was drinking Cody, Bourbon, Jim Bean, Woodstock, Jack Daniels straight. I actually had a good time when I was drinking—I forgot all my troubles. I got drunk, but I knew when to stop, like when I was going to hit the hay or when I spewed. But then I'd start again. I was still going to primary school then. I was drinking at school. The teachers knew. I was actually happy when I was drinking.

When I was kicked out of secondary school, I hit the deputy principal a few times, and threw chairs at students. It was part of coming off the alcohol. Mum tried to help me lots—she got me lots of counselling but I went through heaps of counsellors. They were no good—some didn't want to listen, it was too hard to cope with me, some told my mum they couldn't take any more. I did it myself I reckon. How? I got me a good boyfriend.

My boyfriend stopped me drinking. He's tall, he's against drinking—he's a Jehovah's Witness, and so is my mum's boyfriend. He's against swearing. He doesn't like people disrespecting their parents especially their mum. He's my mum's boyfriend's nephew, by adoption. He lives with us. We've got a rule that they are not allowed to live with us until we know them properly, because of my background troubles, and it took 2 years to get to know my boyfriend before I even offered him my hand in friendship. [Rose]

Tweety as we have seen on page 16, lives with the influence of drugs and alcohol, and she also uses these substances quite heavily in the weekend. However, there seemed to be deep seated reasons to why this was happening:

I've sniffed glue when I'm drunk. It's hard to explain. It's when I get depressed—my older sister is mental—she's in a mental hospital—she takes medication but it makes her real fat. She's a lot worse than me. I don't take medication—I have my own way of calming down—I slit my wrists—it helps me calm down. [Tweety]

The Literature

There are a number of studies internationally that have found links between students in AE centres, or the equivalent, who engaged in health-risk behaviours, had high rates of substance abuse, trouble with the police, previous physical and sexual abuse, and emotional problems with symptoms of depression and anxiety (cited in Denny, Clark and Watson, 2003).

While our research did not have a quantitative purpose to it, we were able to extrapolate from the data to add up rough totals of where students had explicitly mentioned similar practices. We had observed during our visits to the AE centres that most of the students we interviewed and those we didn't, smoked cigarettes in break time. Many had smoked weed / dope / marijuana. Most drank alcohol, with the exception of some of the Pacific Island students, where it is not customary to drink in their homes. Many did all three (smoked cigarettes, dope and drank alcohol) on a regular basis.

In the NZ study (Denny et al. 2004):

90% of AE students smoked cigarettes;
70% recently used alcohol or marijuana;
76% of female students and 64% of male students had 5 or more drinks of alcohol in a row recently.

When compared with a USA study (Grunbaum, 2000, in Denny et. al)

80% NZ AE females compared to 54% USA AE females reported current alcohol use, and 78% NZ females compared to 44% USA females reported marijuana use.

Resilient mothers keeping children safe

Resilient mothers who kept trying to keep their children out of trouble, or to keep them safe were a recurring theme in several of the stories. Against the odds they persisted, trying several different

avenues in some cases. Mothers were mentioned more often than fathers in this role, and in some cases it was fathers or partners where the trouble began. Often we were given just a glimpse of the situation, as the students told their accounts while remaining loyal to both parents, as children from split families often are.

One mother had managed to keep her husband's gang life separate from home life. Their daughter **Lush** said: *"When dad is at home he is a home dad. It used to be an issue—but he keeps home and gang separate now. Gang members used to come over home a lot—not so much now. My mum won't let my dad do things at home like what he does when he goes out with his gang mates."*

Another mother had tried very hard to help her daughter Rose get over her alcoholism as a 12 year old. She had also come to an agreement with Rose about men staying in their house after her ex-boyfriend caused trouble (possibly sexual abuse of her daughter). **Rose** explained:

"We've got a rule that they are not allowed to live with us until we know them properly, because of my background troubles...And my mum has been going out with her boyfriend for quite a long time but he didn't move in until I was ready, so my mum says if my daughter and kids aren't ready, then its not OK."

GeniusOne's father was in the Black Power gang and her mother finally managed to remove her children from the gang environment in Auckland, after she was successful in getting a restriction order lifted, which had prevented her from leaving the city. In order to keep the children safe while in the city, she kept shifting house. GeniusOne attended 12 schools in her first year of schooling, 8 intermediates and 3 secondary schools:

"Every month we would move – that was my first year at school. My dad kept taking me out of school to the gang headquarters. I loved to read. When I was four my mum taught me the alphabet, and we had heaps of books at home. I remember one called Annie – the first book I ever read, even

Sonny's mother moved the family to the north island for a fresh start after her two boys kept getting into trouble with police for stealing cars (over 100). Sonny explained how he got into stealing:

"My older brother looked after me cos mums always working—Mum works at some brothel or something – she's like a manager. I love my cars aye, but mum got angry at us and telling us off, so when we came up here she said 'you don't need to steal – you can just ask me for stuff and I'll find a way of getting it for you'. So she bought my brother a car. She said if I can finish school she'll get me a car or motorbike – I want a dirt bike."
[Sonny]

While GeniusOne could be described as a transient child this does not reflect negligence or non-caring on the part of her family. In the wider circumstances of her life however, her mother appears to have considered the children's physical safety over and above a settled education. What is to be acknowledged is that she sent them to school at all, considering the constant movement. It is clear however, that she valued education, by teaching her daughter to read before she even started school.

Reuben's family situation was polarised, but his mother was doing her best to protect the children from their father's gang influence.

Dad has close involvement in the Mongrel Mob. I live at home with mum and my step dad and two brothers and a sister. All the whānau are connected to the gang. It's a bit strange about mum and gangs and religion. You walk into the house and its just mob posters everywhere, then down the end of the house are the pictures of Jesus and stuff. She tries to influence us to avoid gangs (through religion). My stepdad is an ex-skinhead (whitepower). Mum met him while dad was in prison. Mum is Pākehā and dad is Māori— they don't really see each other too much. I get on fine with my stepdad—even though he has all his white power tattoos and stuff. My stepdad has raised the two youngest kids and that's cool [Reuben].

Summary of Whānau and Families section

Students provided us with a glimpse into their family lives and situations—telling us as much as they decided to divulge. We became increasingly aware during the study that we were probably only being shown the tip of the iceberg and that what lay beneath the waves could only be guessed at.

The literature warns it is easy to blame families for the problems their children get into and to criticise them for their lack of interest and support (Tabin, 1999). However, as Levin (2004, p.19) points out, “parents vary in their ability to provide necessary supports to children for a whole range of reasons, including inadequate incomes as well as stresses and problems in their own lives”.

A deficit view is not helpful, because of the way it closes down options and possibilities for change. However, it does not mean that families and whānau are devoid of all responsibility either. What is needed is much more understanding about the stresses and problems in families, and an awareness of the gaps in emotional support necessary for these students. Because of their family backgrounds, which children have little control over, it seemed to us that these students have high and specific needs on a par with students who have special needs for physical and cognitive disabilities.

The next chapter (3) elaborates on the influence of violence in many of these childrens' lives, and chapter 4 case studies stories where students were involved in gangs through families and/or friends. Chapter 5, on the schooling experience of these students, begins to illustrate the

increasing frustrations and explosions of anger that occurred for many students in particular schooling contexts, which resulted in their being excluded from mainstream schooling.

3. The influence of violence in students' lives

There were many stories that included references to physical, verbal and emotional violence of various kinds. Young people told us of the ways in which violence had been part of their family, school, gang, and social lives. Some was violence being inflicted on these young people by family members, peers, or gangs. Some was violence to others inflicted by these young people themselves. It was evident that being raised in an environment where violent behaviour was a regular occurrence had affected these young people. We were told stories of how they had become people that used violence in their interactions with others and as an outlet for their emotions. Approximately two-thirds of the stories mention domestic violence of some kind. Incidents of verbal violence permeate all chapters, because it was found to be so insidious, and this includes use of verbal violence by teachers towards students, which is reported in the schooling chapter.

In some instances young people were hesitant to provide detailed descriptions about what had happened, yet they were clear that they had encountered violence in their lives. There are many reasons why these young people may have chosen to tell us limited or sanitised stories of violence in their lives; to protect family members; being unwilling to share this aspect of their lives with strangers; or as one young man commented, to avoid dealing with people's disbelief and shock at what some of them may have experienced. In this chapter we will explore some of the types of violence these young people have encountered and the impact this had on their behaviour.

Domestic violence

The majority of young people we spoke to had experienced domestic violence in some form. For some domestic violence in the home was sporadic or connected to a particular event or time in their families' lives. For others it was an ongoing factor in their home life since they could remember. This sort of behaviour may have occurred for many reasons including disagreements within the family or a particular member trying to assert dominance. In talking about violence at home, young people described the different ways this played out.

(1) Some had witnessed their parents fighting;

We were in the type of family life where my mum used to get beaten up by her boyfriend that she was with for about 5 years. [**Samantha**]

I was born into a family that smoked drugs, always argued, who fight and drink a lot. Mum was getting beaten up by dad, so moved to [...city]. Then they broke up. I live with my dad because my mum is a bitch and she blames me—she yells at me down the street. Dad doesn't fight now. [**Mere**]

(2) Violence was used as a form of discipline, with young people telling us their parents beat them (gave them 'hidings') for misbehaving;

Plenty of violence at home during times—hidings for acting up [**Reuben**]

I never went to the detentions. They [the school] told my dad about it and that's when I got the smack. [**Kitty**]

(3) Fathers were reported enacting violence towards family members in a number of ways:

Dad is in jail. He got 9 years, but he's only done 4. He raped my sister. It happened about 2 years ago, then my mate committed suicide the next year. Can't remember if mum and dad lived together. Dad's been to jail before, don't know what for, can't remember...he beat my sister up in front of me. He was really violent to mum. When we were little (3 or 4), my dad kidnapped my sister and me...he took us to [...town]. We had no clothes, he didn't shower us for weeks and stuff, we stayed in the same clothes. [**Polly**]

(4) Students reported fighting with their siblings;

Things were getting nasty at home—mainly physical—because I had a smart mouth and my brothers didn't like it. I act the same with dad but with him its play fighting—more serious with my brothers. [**Anaru**]

Another young person had adopted a combative approach to dealing with people, learnt from her older siblings. In her view it was important to fight back when challenged and she even had options if the challenger was male. She had a strong self image of herself and her brothers as soldiers, defending their territory and themselves;

I guess fighting comes from my 2 older brothers—could come from them. I stick up for myself, if a girl gets in my face I will give her a hiding, but if a boy does, I've got two older brothers who will take care of them...I've got a sore knuckle aye—Sunday, from a fight I had in the weekend—a street fight—this chick—don't like her coming down my street, don't like her being a bitch. I just had to sort her out. And then she ended up ripping my top, so she's going to get another hiding. Apparently I broke her nose, fractured her cheek bone and gave her concussion. But she'll be right. No it's all good. My parents would say "don't hit her". I don't like people telling me what to do...There's no hitting in my family—not father—but me and my brothers we are soldiers. At primary school when I got shitty I would hit people, like my brother. [**Superman**]

(5) Some young people were involved in altercations with their parents:

Before my parents had separated things weren't too good—everyone having a go at each other—sometimes it was OK but mostly it wasn't. It was a mix of verbal and physical stuff—mainly physical between me and my dad as I got older. I was 11 when I first hit dad—something happened and I burst and threw a punch.

I left one of the other centres after getting into a scrap with my step-mum. The police got involved and charges were laid. [Henry]

One of these young people was involved in a less common form of domestic violence in our study where two sisters beat up their mother:

One day my mum wouldn't get out of the doorway so I hit her and then dad hit me and then the police got called, and me and my dad got arrested, and we were up in court for assault. My sister used to beat up my mum all the time, and so my mum kicked her out of home, and she went to live with my aunty. A month ago my sister and my aunty had a fight and my sister hurt her hand through a broken window and she had to go to hospital. When she came out of hospital my mum went and picked her up and brought her home. Things have been heaps better since then.

Since we've been to court we don't beat her [mother] up any more. I think we must have got it from my mum, who used to get pissed off with her own mother—my grandmother, and once she pushed her down the stairs. When mum pisses us off we hit her or push her round. She used to hit back but now she doesn't. She used to sit there and laugh at us. I just get angry with my mum. When we got home from school she was always sitting at the computer. We told her to get a job. She wouldn't do housework or cooking. She did washing once a week and we would have to do everything else. She is real lazy and addicted to the computer. She never cooked. But now she is better. I think she is bored. [Christine]

One of the clear messages conveyed in young people's stories was that they themselves had adopted violence as a tool or option for dealing with others, probably as a result of their exposure to violence in the home.

Student's behavioural violence

In the context of this report we are using the term 'behavioural violence' to describe how violence was used by young people in their social interactions. In sharing stories and observations the interview team noted that there was constant reference by young people to the use of violent behaviour as a means of expressing themselves or dealing with situations and/or people in their lives. Nearly all of the young people we spoke to had been involved in violent incidents either in their family life, at school, or out of school. The following excerpt provided by the clinical psychologist in the research team provides some theoretical background on the impact of violent upbringings on young people and their own 'dis-regulated' (violent) behaviour:

DIS-REGULATED BEHAVIOUR.

Clinically the terms used are 'enacting' or 'externalising'⁵. The terms describe a range of behaviours where the individual has difficulty managing or 'regulating' their emotional (affective), cognitive (psychological) and behavioural states. In other words they are 'dis-regulated'. It is held that such developmental outcomes are associated with poor attachment in early childhood (since the attachment dynamic is central to the development of affect regulatory processes and brain/neural structures) and exposure to or experience of trauma (which could include exposure to domestic violence, experience of physical abuse, sexual abuse, etc) which leads to chronic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), itself associated with some of the same symptoms. Children whose primary caregivers have poor affect modulation themselves are more likely to develop such outcomes.

Longer term outcomes for such children or young people are the development of clinically diagnosed Oppositional Defiant Disorder or Conduct Disorder, sometimes the diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder and the eventual development of Anti-Social Personality Disorder or its traits. (Fergusson, 1998; Fonagy, et al. 2002; Rutter & Srouffe, 2000; Seigal, 2007).

In plain language, this means that children who 'act out', like many of the students in our research, may have been exposed to violent and traumatising experiences in their lives, or have had inadequate bonding experiences with their mothers as new-born babies. In the latter case the brain development (and wiring) which normally takes place, has been interrupted or delayed, but the effect is the same as for people who have experience PTSD. As a result, these people are more likely to experience problems in regulating their own emotional behaviour and affective states later in life. Moreover, children who are parented by people who have acted out in violent ways themselves, are even more likely to 'act out'.

The term 'regulating' one's emotional (affective), cognitive (psychological) and behavioural states, means being able to recognise depths of feelings and emotions and moderate one's behaviour in relation to this. When one feels disappointed or sad, as most of us do from time to time, normal behaviour is knowing that we will not sink into terrifying depths of depression, or panic attacks of anxiety and fear. When one feels angry it is the ability not to default to the 'flight or fight' positions. An example to illustrate the difference is of two drug users 'coming down' off a high after using the drug P. This drug is renowned for its nasty side effects in making people feel depressed after the 'high' experience. A person in the 'dis-regulated behaviour' camp will struggle with this experience because they have little understanding and trust that this 'coming down' experience is a transitory state, but will improve over time. They become terrified that they will sink lower and lower into the depression they are experiencing, and so they take alcohol to

⁵ Clinical term's used to describe a range of behaviours in both children and adults which has the following characteristic; non-compliant, disorganized, poorly boundaried, difficulty in managing emotional arousal, externalising, aggressive, poor social skills and/or a poor awareness of social rules and norms.

mask the effects of ‘coming down’. In this state, they become so terrified and panicked, that they will do anything to acquire alcohol, including armed hold-ups. A person not in the dis-regulated camp, is aware that this state is a result or side effect of their drug use, and knows they will come out the other side, and will probably just go home to sleep it off.

Young people’s stories of their own violent ‘dis-regulated’ behaviour reflected those they told us about their families. Being raised in and around violent behaviour appears to be a critical reason why they adopt the kinds of violent behaviour they do towards others.

Bullies and Bullying

Related closely to this are the stories from young people who identified themselves as bullies or who described bullying behaviour. Some young people were aware that their bullying behaviour was linked to their home life and how they had been raised:

When I first came here (AE), I tried to bully my way through, but it didn’t really work because they just weren’t interested. I reckon the first year was the best for me, but I was still bullying. In my first year, I got suspended twice, three times for bullying. They sat me down, talked to me and brought my father in...Before, if someone came up to me and looked at me funny, I would go up to them and push them or punch them, but when I was trying to work with it, I wouldn’t think of that (people hating on me). I would just look at them and smile. I did that myself because I really wanted to change...As a little girl—My mum would describe me as a brat, a nightmare. I think my anger comes from... I didn’t have a dad and mum, I just had my nana and sister...It was all about trying to be cool and that just led me no-where. Throwing my weight around, do anything to get attention. Not doing any learning. I used to bully the teachers.

Question: So you were a bully? Why do you think you were like that?

Answer: I don’t know... when I was a kid, I used to see a lot of alcohol and violence so I think that’s what I knew, all I knew. [**Jessica**]

One young woman was not sure why she was a bully:

It’s easy to lash out physically or verbally...It was a pretty good school aye, but I was the bully there—pretty naughty. I don’t know why I became a bully...I used to beat people up and not do work and be smart to the teachers and that. That’s been at all the schools since I was 6. I was used to being at the top of the pecking order, could get people to do what I wanted, but that changed at secondary school. [**Bonny**]

Several young people voiced regrets about their bullying behaviour and in some cases were happy with changes they had made about how they once acted:

I would tease and bully other kids. As I got older the bullying was more likely to be physical...I regret it [bullying]. I think some people might even run away from me if they saw me on the street. I don’t like that idea. [**Henry**]

Things were ok until a boy threw a ball in my face—I threw it back and he punched me so we had a fight. A couple of weeks after that he whacked me across the face with a shoe and I chased him and beat him up in front of his mum...Friends would encourage me to fight other people cause they wouldn't fight themselves. I have a reputation as a good fighter. I don't think that reputation is a good thing for me but I feel like I'm learning to control myself better...It feels a lot better to not have that reputation anymore—where I'd just beat people up. Like before if I was with my mate who was asking his mum for money, she'd see me and be scared and hand out money. Now she isn't scared and will only give him a little bit of money. **[Anaru]**

Other young people became bullies in response to how their peers were acting, and to exert power over others:

I've been fighting and bullying and got suspended too much and wagging, from when I was year 8. That was when I started bullying and stuff. People at school always get cheeky. I was picking on people. Teachers talked to me about the bullying. **[Colin]**

Some young people told us stories of reacting to teasing and bullying from other students. Several of them told us that they did not regularly get into fights but sometimes things got too much for them. Frequently the bullying they described involved verbal abuse which was something these young people found extremely difficult to handle. They told us others bullied them about their school work/academic performance, race or culture, sexual persuasion, or their family. This led to some fighting back against those bullying them, in a way they were familiar with, i.e. physically, irrespective of whether they liked or wanted to fight:

I was there 2 years but I got bullied from all the older girls and one day they came up to me and started a fight and I started fighting back. Then I got kicked out. Just one fight. I wanted to stay at school. I told the teachers that I had been bullied but they didn't listen. It was because I was pretty popular. I don't want attention but people like me. It wasn't a serious fight. I was the only one expelled. The school couldn't take me back—the principal saw me on top of the girl—she jumped to conclusions. My fight at school was a shock for me to see I was kicked out of school for just that one thing. Every other person got 3–4 warnings. I love to clown and make people laugh—my friends like that. I don't swear and don't like violence and people feel comfortable with me. **[Naomi]**

Me and my mate were getting hassled for being lesbians and the teacher didn't stop the kids just said ignore it. We would walk out of class. Most of the fighting was because kids would disrespect (disrespect) my mum and put me down. I'm good at looking after myself. **[Tweety]**

I was just smashing up the school aye and having fights and things. They (other students) were just shit stirring and I couldn't take it anymore. **[Robert]**

Things weren't going too good at school, getting bullied because I was too pretty and stuff, other people made up rumours about me that weren't true. **[Samantha]**

I still got pretty fired up when I was living with my grandma. The thing that sparks me off is whenever people insult my friends or scrap them out or when they attack my family, but worst of all is when they say things about my mum...At the first school it was real hard—I was bullied for the first year and a half by heaps of kids, and the principal there hated me and wouldn't do anything about it, until my father came up, and then it stopped for a while but then it started again. I started to stick up for myself and then I just went mental—lost it...I think I was bullied because our family was actually quite poor and I didn't wear flash clothes like the rest of them. Kids from farming district used to wear label clothes...When I first started at school here the Emo thing came up and I had blue/black hair. Kids started to tease me about that but I stuck up for myself. So it stopped and they got to know me, I don't believe in judging people by what they look like. I don't believe in hitting first but if someone hits me I'll hit back. Hitting first gets you into trouble. [Pink]

Primary school was good until I got bullied. That was the start of things going bad. I had good friends and was learning but then it wasn't so good. I got jumped at school—I told a teacher but she didn't do anything. I wagged and had to go to a councillor. After I was jumped we had a meeting with the school but the teacher didn't get punished. Sometimes I was fighting but after a while I left it but they kept going. Then I got badly beaten up and my parents found me and called the cops—that's when I felt that I couldn't trust any teachers... being at AE I've started to think I can trust people again. [Bob]

Others told of reaching breaking point after ongoing threats from other students:

I got really angry and hit a student over the head with a hard cover book. She kept saying she was going to smash me, and she's bigger than me. [Dillon]

Some young people would take out their frustrations about being bullied on their peers, to make themselves feel better:

I always thought after about why I did it [bullying]. I'd regret it. I always feel bad after I do it but I don't think before I do. I do before I think.

I would hold anger inside—I sort of always knew that but I'd release it on other people. The anger was from people getting smart to me but I'd go and take it out on other people. If I felt bad I'd feel better from making someone else feel bad. But I would have regret cause I'd know how they felt. [Tom]

Whether these young people were the instigators of violent behaviour or retaliating due to others actions they were more likely to express themselves in a physical manner. They acted in ways they had seen their families and peers interact with each other. Several young people had spoken of learning about why they acted out in a physical manner and many felt relief that they were starting to regain control over their anger and actions.

4. The influence of gangs in students' lives

Nearly a third of the young people we spoke to had experienced life in or around gangs. Being raised in a gang family had particular influences, but did not necessarily result in the young person wanting to become a gang member. This was frequently due to some form of intervention from a family member, or a conscious choice on the part of the young person to avoid that lifestyle. For some, involvement in gangs was a personal choice, while for others there was an expectation or encouragement from family and/or peers to join a gang. For most young people gang life involved a mix of violence, drug use and other anti-social behaviour such as tagging/bombing. Criminal behaviour (drug dealing, robbery, burglary, assault, etc) was only mentioned by two participants while others spoke more generally about their gang related activities. Some young people attempted to keep their gang related activities separate from school life, whereas for others, gang related behaviour was present in both their school and wider lives. Gang membership or association was spread across a variety of gangs in all the different regions in our study.

While most of these young people were involved in youth gangs some were also connected to larger, more established gangs such as the Mongrel Mob. While not a new phenomenon, youth gangs⁶ are becoming increasingly prevalent worldwide and this trend is reflected in New Zealand. Established gangs such as the Mongrel Mob, Black Power and the Nomads⁷ target and recruit young people ('prospects') yet are largely comprised of adults. It was quickly apparent that these young people were aware of the factors that influenced their connections to gangs. Some saw their involvement as a continuation of family membership to a gang, while others had chosen to follow a particular family member or group of friends, which led to a gang connection. However irrespective of how they had become associated with gangs young people told us that leaving that way of life was difficult. It involved breaking connections with groups of friends or family, and changing behaviours which was hard to initiate and maintain without support from family or friends not connected to gangs. In this chapter we will explore the ways that young people talked about their involvement with gangs and how that impacted on their lives.

⁶ Youth gangs have existed in New Zealand in some form since the 1950's. Pg 8: 'From Wannabes to Youth Offenders. MSD Research report on Youth Gangs in Counties Manukau (2006).

⁷ Sourced from New Zealand police http://www.police.govt.nz/service/cib/organised_crime.html

Being raised in a Gang household

Several young people had grown up in gang households where one or both parents (caregivers) were gang members (in some cases their wider whānau as well). However this scenario was not always an accurate predictor of young people's involvement in gangs.

One young woman recounted how her mother tried to protect her family from such an environment by keeping them separate from gang activities or associates.

Mum brought us here to get them away from the gangs. Mum was frightened because my brother started getting into drugs and alcohol. Mum stayed away from it and wanted to get us away from it. Dad was Black Power, I was with him all the time—I watched him with drugs. It was fun but drug people are not fun. I've seen Once were Warriors and it was like that. [**GenuisOne**]

Another young woman found that stories of her father's involvement in gangs had encouraged her to avoid becoming involved in gangs.

When I first moved in with dad, I could understand where my anger was coming from, because he used to tell me all these stories about when he was my age, he used to be really angry, in a rage, in a gang. And I don't want to turn out like that. All the yuck stuff they get into, gangs and bullying. He's settled down because he's got his kids now. My sister used to say he was never usually home. [**Jessica**]

The next young woman described how things in her household had changed when her mother made her father keep his gang participation and activities separate from the family's home life.

When dad is at home he is a home dad. It used to be an issue—but he keeps home and gang separate now. Gang members used to come over home a lot—not so much now. My family smoke and drink when they are out. But my mum won't let my dad do things at home like what he does when he goes out with his gang mates. [**Lush**]

Some of these young people talked about how it was difficult to avoid becoming involved in such a lifestyle. One young man told us that his experiences had normalised gang life and culture to him:

All the whānau are connected to the gang. I see gang life every day cause my brother is a patched member and lives with us at the family home. It [Gang life] doesn't bother me, it's just life [**Reuben**]

He went on to talk about telling his father that gang life wasn't for him and that he didn't intend on becoming a patched member in the gang. He had seen what that life was like and had made a decision to choose something different for his future. In this situation the family was willing and able to support his decision by keeping him removed from any gang activity or information.

Sometimes hard to do things differently to family—they stick to their thing and I do my own thing. They don't bring their stuff to me. If something goes down they don't talk to me about it. I don't want to be like them but it's hard to avoid gang life. My dad knows that I don't want to be a patched member and doesn't push me into it—same with the rest of the family [**Reuben**]

Another young man had extended family in different gangs and voiced a desire to stay away from gang life as a result of what he had seen.

Too much gangs here—Black Power—down my street—I want to be out of it. One of my cousins is in one gang and one is in another—they don't come round home with their patches. I've seen it and don't want to be round it. The Mongrel Mob came round with no doors on the car and shot—nearly got me. My uncle got done over in these streets here. [**Robert**]

Jerry told us that he was already a gang member but had made a decision to limit his involvement, despite some of his extended family being full gang members:

I'm with the Savage Minors mob but I keep to myself—I'm not going to get patched. Most of mum's family are in the Black Power up in [...region]. [**Jerry**]

For other young people from families with generational connections to longstanding gangs such as the Mongrel Mob and Black Power there was rarely a sense of choice about their future membership. For these young people it was not easy to see a way out of being involved in a gang. This young man found it hard to see a different outcome for himself and was somewhat fatalistic about his future gang involvement

My real dad is involved in the gangs and my step-dad is in the mob. Most of my family are in the Mob. It's hard to be different. My cousins, dad and uncles are in it. I can imagine when I'm older, I would be in jail. I will try to control that, try to change. But it's hard because it's the way I've been brought up. But if I do go to jail, I'll see my real dad in jail. I haven't seen him since I was 11. [**E-Rep**]

Older brothers in gangs

Several young men we interviewed spoke of getting involved in gangs through their older brothers. In most instances the parents in these families were not involved in gangs and in some cases were unaware of their son's participation.

Mum and dad didn't know I was in a gang when I was at school. I probably would have got a hiding if they had found out—they wouldn't have been happy. [**Max**]

Some young men spoke of their desire to emulate their older brothers while others felt they had become involved by following the choices and behaviour of siblings rather than making decisions themselves.

I was getting into trouble outside home. Drugs, alcohol, assault. I was in a gang. It's pretty hard to get out of the gang cause I know a lot of them. All this was happening while I was at mum's place. Everyday I would go down to town, getting drugs and alcohol. Not at school. My older brother was a Blood⁸, looked up to that. He's still involved but I do my own thing more now. [Nate]

Just having brothers involved in gangs could also create trouble for young people. Prior to joining a youth gang this next young man told us that having an older family member involved in a gang resulted in others making assumptions about his association.

My older brothers are in gangs and had history at the school. My oldest brother set up one of the first gangs there and had done a lot of fighting so they [school and peers] saw me as being the same. They thought I was the same as my brother...Near the end of 3rd form another gang started to get agro toward my group of friends... they thought we were a gang even though we didn't have a crew name. We were just a bunch of mates that hung out. Some younger members from established gangs started fights with us and we would retaliate. [Max]

Peer pressure as a way of joining a gang while at school

Young people also told us that friends were also were a factor in getting involved in gangs. In the last decade or so overseas gang culture has had a particularly strong influence in the development of youth gangs such as the Crips, the Bloods, and more recently the Killer Beez (which is a youth focused offshoot of the Tribesman motorcycle gang⁹). Several of the young people who spoke to us about gangs did not become involved with them until intermediate or secondary school. In these cases participants described how friends were the main influence in their joining a gang or a group of young people closely linked to gangs.

When I was first attracted to these friends in gangs I was at Intermediate. Then the crowd I was hanging round with at secondary school got into smoking drugs, gangs—I didn't really care about education at the time. I had a mind set about who gives a shit, sorry, care about this and that. My identity, I didn't know who I was really, and I thought smoking drugs made me feel cool and it calmed me down....There was this gang of Young Eastsiders and we used to hang around with them and then they started getting us into smoking dope—we used to look up to them. [Sam]

At times young people were connected through school friends but kept their gang life separate to school.

I started in a gang in second year at intermediate. But I was still going to school. Nothing was happening at school but gang stuff was happening outside school. [Nate]

⁸ A Youth gang.

⁹ P12 'From Wannabes to Youth Offenders. MSD Research report on Youth Gangs in Counties Manukau (2006)

Two young men we spoke to had joined gangs as a result of the groups of peers they chose to associate with. Neither had family members involved in gangs yet there was an attraction to what these groups of young people were doing. The first young man joined a gang through his friends at school. He liked what he had seen of the gang lifestyle; in particular the fighting and socialising that went with it. At the time of the interview he had been making attempts to improve his behaviour yet found it difficult as he was still hanging out with the same group of friends.

Dad doesn't like me hanging out with my mates cause they are in gangs. Big thing at my College—Mongrel Mob and Black Power are around. When I first came here I thought it was cool to be in a gang—fighting and stuff, I liked the fighting and bullying. [Colin]

The second young person had initially made his gang connections outside of school. He shared a passion for tagging with several of his friends and they started a gang at the end of primary school to pursue it. Since that time he had developed a reputation as a skilled tagger and was seen as a leader by his peers. His involvement in gangs led him to drug use and fighting while he was at secondary school. At the time of the interview he was a member of two gangs; one for bombing/tagging and the other for fighting.

All my mates from X school went to Y school. Good thing. Tagging stuff came up at X. I started doing it first then others followed. Things started to go off there. I got kicked out and stood down for fighting and smoking weed and sniffing glue. Everyone was trying it so I thought I would and then I got addicted...I'm Leader among my mates, it comes natural, I don't really choose it. I'm involved in gangs, chose it on my own. It's for whoever. We got a fighting gang and a bombing/tagging gang. Started at X. I'm still involved in gangs today. [Method]

Gang Life

The young people who were involved in gangs told us a variety of stories about what gang life entailed for them and their peers. Gang participation seemed to be mainly a male pursuit, as there were only two young women who mentioned gang membership of any kind in their interviews.

One young woman told us she was a recruiter for a gang:

I had connections with gangs—I used to work the buds—recruit for the Mob. [Tweety]

Another young woman had become involved in a cultural group at school that ganged up against other groups.

We were all in cultural groups and we were always fighting—we were in the newspaper—our school was not a good school. I got in fights there. Got frustrating and after school we would have fights. Students didn't care what the consequences were. [Lush]

Sometimes gang association was decided by a young person's race or culture.

At my school all the Tongans were Crips and the Samoans were Bloods. People had to choose what they wanted cause other people would think you were in one of the gangs, no matter what.

[Max]

At times participation in gangs had a direct impact on young people's learning. One young man had attempted to stay focused on his school work but was unable to, due to his association in gang activities whilst at school:

Once all the gang fighting and stuff started I tried to keep up with my work but it didn't work out... We used to have massive rumbles in PE and other classes—all the kids had their gang colours and that would start it. [Max]

Gang rules

In talking to us about gangs one young man explained some of the rules about gang members socialising. It was possible for members of different gangs to associate in certain situations if certain rules were observed:

It's all about respect, for example, if my brother was Mob, and I have another patch [from a different gang], I have to take it off. I can still hold it in my hand but not put it on. **E-Rep**

Perceptions of gangs

Two young men told us how they had experienced people judging them due to their family's involvement in gangs. The first young man recounted how his teachers treated him differently after learning his father and brother were gang members:

If dad or my brother came to pick me up from school it would cause issues at school—kind of intimidate people at the school just by who he was. Once people [teachers] knew, I got treated differently, like I was some kind of piece of shit. They would only be there to pick me up—didn't even come into the school. [Reuben]

The second young man found that the reputations of his older brothers influenced his treatment by school management, after getting into an altercation with gang members in class:

My older brothers are in gangs and had history at the school. My oldest brother set up one of the first gangs there and had done a lot of fighting so they [school and peers] saw me as being the same. So they thought I was the same as my brother. I was organised to have a fight with two Tongans in one of my classes and I threw a chair at them and the teacher thought I was throwing it at her. If you do something to a teacher, that's it. She didn't believe me that I wasn't throwing it at her. Cause of my history and not getting along with that teacher they didn't believe me. That's what got me excluded for the last time. [Max]

Alternatives to gangs

Within the overall discussion of becoming involved in gangs and all that that entailed, two of the young people we spoke to had severed, or found ways to limit, their gang connections, largely as a result of their involvement in Alternative Education centres (see chapter 6—“Young People’s AE Experiences” for further discussion). One young man spoke about his reasons for removing himself entirely from gangs and some of the difficult things about that decision:

Deep down inside myself I thought I don’t really want to do this stuff—I feel like running away now—it’s just not me. I wanted to step out—I don’t want to do this kind of stuff. But I was scared of what my boys would think. Pretty weird now—they still do the same things. They’d ask me to come and smoke and drink and when I say no they didn’t think I was serious and they started laughing, and I was real hurt, aye? But I realised they really need to change—they are in the same place where they were 3–4 years ago. They are going nowhere. [Sam]

The next young man explained that he knew that people were attracted to being in a gang but wanted to make it about socialising and friendship rather than conflict and fighting. He was hopeful that changing his actions might influence his older brothers as well:

I’m only in a NC [No Colours] gang now, trying to stop all the fighting and stuff—I’ve had enough. I’m sick of it all and getting kicked out of school. I’m trying to get people to get into it to avoid gangs. It’s not a gang that will go and fight other gangs; people like to be in a gang so it’s a way to get people to join. My eldest brother is still in gangs though. I want to show my brothers another way so they can change as well, but it’s hard as I’m the younger brother and if I try to tell them anything they just give me a hiding. The only way to stop them is for me to stop and try to make something of myself. My family are happy I’m not in one of those gangs anymore. I don’t have any gang patches or colours anymore. [Max]

Summary

It was clear from these young people’s stories that in some regions secondary schools are facing the growing influence of gang culture, particularly that of youth gangs. In several cases young people described widespread gang participation at their schools and frequently a high level of involvement by young Māori and Pasifika men. Two young men from an urban region advised that gang membership or association in their schools had tended to be split along racial or cultural lines. This could escalate the situation and make it difficult for young people to opt out or avoid gang involvement as there was pressure on to ‘choose a side’ particularly if you were Māori or Pasifika.

5. Students' educational pathways and experiences

This chapter explores the views of the AE students about their past schooling experiences, and chapter 6 explores their views about their current AE educational experiences. Both chapters need to be read together, as the students often made comparisons in their discussions, but in this chapter we focus mainly on their perspectives on primary and secondary schooling and the kinds of learning these young people identified as helpful. Our findings show that the most common experience and trajectory for AE students is that they enjoyed primary school and considered in the main that they were successful learners there, but that at secondary school, or for a minority—intermediate school — they became disengaged in their learning. Their reasons for engagement and disengagement are diverse, and we explore these in greater detail in this chapter.

The most surprising finding in this study was that virtually all the students had become “turned on” again to learning in the AE centres, after being “turned off” at secondary school. Almost all participants said they liked learning and that they *wanted* to learn. We think this finding is significant because it rejects the common myth that these young people are irretrievably lost to the education system and a potential drain to society. However, the way that secondary schools are structured and organised does not appear to meet the needs of this group of students.

Primary Schooling

Most students (80%) said they liked their primary school experiences and enjoyed learning there.

It was good aye? Real good! I was full of joy when I was young—I enjoyed it heaps. I wish I still had that. Primary school you have one teacher and you see them every morning and you go “Hi Mr” I had heaps of friends there. [Sam]

I loved primary school. I used to read journals at home to my dad. I was in everything—all the cultural groups (kapa haka)—sporting activities and things, but when I got to college, I didn't like it. [Lush]

Most of the students we interviewed believed that they had been moderately successful learners at primary school, while some appeared to have been very successful learners.

I liked primary school. I remember going on camps and trips. Neat teacher there. I was quite brainy at primary school so I had to go to another class because it was harder. Favourite teacher there—he was really good at teaching us. He taught us until we understood what he was saying and it was fun. **[Kahlia]**

I enjoyed primary—had good memories of it. I was in a higher ability group when I was 11/12 and was a year ahead. Found the work OK—it just became normal. The teachers were good back then, they would help you out if you needed it. They would understand if I needed help. **[Max]**

Learning was good there—I was a bit slow to start to read—I went to Reading Recovery and did well. I'm reading way above my age level now. I like reading—a good book makes me feel I can escape my surroundings. I like science fiction and some true stories. Go to the library a couple of times. I was a good chess player—my principal at primary school taught me for private lessons. He said I thought outside the box—I came up with new moves—he was stumped because I beat him. I was only 10 or 11. I went to the championships—won for my school. When I left no-one helped me go further with that. **[Will]**

Relationships with teachers

Several students talked about favourite teachers in their interviews and most of these were primary school teachers.

At primary school I was really good, I had this teacher, she was the best thing that ever happened to me. I liked her. She was always there, helpful teacher, caring teacher, whenever we get into trouble, she'll be there to help us. I liked her probably more than my mum sometimes. Before high school—I liked being with my teachers and friends, reading and writing, I'd write stories. When I was in high school, I changed... started wagging. I was a troubled kid. **[Kitty]**

I was a real good boy at primary school. Played rugby there. There were good teachers there. I learnt a lot—like fractions. I can read pretty good now, but had RR which helped at primary school. Dad used to ask about my homework but I told him I didn't have any **[Jerry]**.

I liked a woman teacher at primary school—every day she had a shared lunch for us kids. She did heaps of things for us kids—brought over a lot of her goods and shared a lot of things with us kids. Didn't like Mr. H. who would growl at us for little things. I was wagging at college—wasn't interested, teachers too boring, trying to teach us in a bored way. Not like that at primary. **[Bruce]**

I remember the best time of school was just when I started primary—getting to know other kids and my teacher. I had some teachers that I really liked. I liked their attitudes and personality, they were all different but they were cool with us. It was a cool feeling to stay with them through school, you got to know them better. [Tom]

One student was also able to articulate quite clearly the kinds of learning that appealed to her at primary school:

I liked primary school—its better than college, and the learning was fun. I could sing and sit on the mat and jump around and at college you walk around in circles. It was hard to function cos there's no playgrounds here and no monkey bars and all the bigger people. Learning at primary school was better cause I remembered everything with music and I was in the choir. Because we learnt to music like spelling by rhyming. That's how I learnt to spell "Mississippi" and "computer" and things. Teachers there liked me and they stop and chat to me when I see them, when I go and pick up my little brother and sister. [Rose]

Less successful experiences at primary

Not all the students had successful experiences at primary school. Twenty percent of the students told us that problems began for them at primary school. Most of these children had serious problems going on at home during this time, and some could remember being labelled as having learning disorders.

I went to two primaries—I really liked it, just the fact that I was more behaved back then. Got on with other people, did what I was meant to do, so this sort of made it easier. I liked the people, the work was easy. Learned the basics OK. But my second to last year of primary school, things started to go down hill. Started not behaving properly, couldn't be bothered doing work or anything like that, it was hard to stay concentrated, and getting up every morning was too hard. Started playing up, good at this. I've got a learning disorder. We went to family mental health. Been there a few times. I've got dyslexia and a bit of autism—the learning part. I can't remember what I've read. I learn best when people read to me. [John Doe]

E-Rep's family had gang connections which possibly contributed to his out of control behaviour at school.

I went to ... Primary School—Left school when I was 12. Mr. 'W' was my teacher. I liked him. I got angry now and then but I tried to do my best. I would just lose it and start hurting people. No one came to help, but sometimes I'd do one-on-one with teachers. I'd talk a lot [in class] with mates—made it a bit hard to concentrate. My record was too bad, couldn't go to College. In terms of behaviour, at the end of primary school, it was out of control. Smashing windows, cameras. Tagging. But looking back, it was bad. [E-Rep]

Educational Interventions

Almost half of the students (46%) mentioned various educational interventions they had received at primary school, especially reading recovery (30%) and one-to-one teacher aide assistance.

Teacher aides helped me with reading (RR) and spelling [Robert].

All primary schooling was good. I got help with reading recovery, and help with teacher aides. Maths was my favourite subject. [Tweety]

Those [primary] teachers came to me to help me—didn't have to go to them. Easier to talk to those teachers. Had a teacher-aide that came into the class for my reading. English—was best in the class, but I stink at Maths [Nate].

Primary School was good—mum used to help there with the Rainbow Reading and Toe by Toe¹⁰. I'm a good reader, and my little brother wasn't good at reading so mum helped him with it [Pam].

Medical interventions for health and behaviour

We also asked students about their general health and whether they had been through the usual medical checks at school for ears, eyes and other disabilities¹¹. Most students reported that they had been healthy young children¹². Some students mentioned medical interventions for behavioural problems such as medication for ADHD.

I've always been hyperactive. Me and my two brothers have got ADHD. Started taking medication at Intermediate, don't like taking it—Ritalin—lose my appetite and it makes me—if I don't take it, it makes me all giggly and whatever I want to do. If I take it I listen better and cooperate better. I can see the difference. A teacher picked up on it at Intermediate. [Bonny]

¹⁰ Toe by Toe is a phonetic reading programme mentioned in a Listener (July 5–11) article called “Seizing the day” by Rebecca Macfie. Several students mentioned it being used as a reading intervention in the AE centres.

¹¹ In a recent study of Year 9 and 10 students at Linwood High (Christchurch) in 2006, 70% of these students tested for medical (ears, eyes, and aerobic fitness) and dental problems, needed a referral for at least one problem. (Listener, July 5–11.)

¹² Another study of alternative education students in New Zealand—the Alternative Education Students Health report (Adolescent Health Research Group—Auckland University, 2002) which came out of the survey “Youth 2000”—focused on health behaviours such as dangerous driving behaviours, violence victimisation, substance use, sexual behaviours, and mental health problems. In this study, students also reported their health as good or excellent, but the study found the majority have had problems getting health care when they need it, for reasons such as costs, not wanting to make a fuss or because they couldn't be bothered.

Primary school was alright, but a bit boring. Teachers going on and on and on. Sitting through assembly was hard. I went to three intermediate schools—It was hard, focusing in class. Got easier when I was put on my meds. Mum took me in for an assessment. Then learning but not behaviour got better. I have ADHD. My biggest brother and my big sister have it too. I take medication for it and it helps, makes it easy to sit down and concentrate—I'm not so hyper and I don't feel like being violent. More chilled out. In primary—I was not that great. I could read, do some maths, write after primary. [Bob Down].

Both of these examples mention a number of siblings in the family having ADHD. The tendency for society to attribute medical causes to behavioural problems may be occurring in these instances.

Intermediate Schooling

Three quarters of the student cohort that had attended intermediate schools reported that they had had successful educational experiences there.

Intermediate was alright, pretty ok. I liked school there, could do the work and stuff. Had two teachers at intermediate that I got on with, and my reading teacher. I had two good teachers in two years at intermediate. I had help for everything (school work and stuff). They were heaps different to my teachers at secondary school. One teacher was helping me out with my behaviour, my attitude and a bit of my school work... I listened to him. He was the main person who would listen to me and I could talk to. He seemed like a good person and had time for me. I learnt heaps at intermediate, enjoyed it. The learning was good at primary and intermediate. At secondary school everything changed. My teachers talked quite a bit to my mum and dad when I was at intermediate. I stop in to my old school to see those teachers sometimes. When I was at college if they saw me around they would ask how college was. I would tell them it was alright but really it wasn't. One of my teachers told me I'd find it hard at secondary school—he was right. He told me I could do the work but it would be hard if I didn't try. He helped me at intermediate and it was good [Ace 1].

About a quarter of the students told us they became disengaged, bored and started wagging classes at intermediate school.

Trouble didn't start until intermediate. Just there was more discipline and it was a new environment and new people. I was used to seeing the same people. I was shy and scared when I got to intermediate...when I made new friends, that was when things started to get worse. I think once you get to somewhere new, or a place that is new, you start to change. You can change a lot. That's what basically happened with me. Copying older people and what they do—the bullying and all that, that's what I did. You don't want to be left out or anything. [Tom]

Keeping track of student achievement between schools

This cohort of students had typically attended a number of schools. This can present a problem in terms of sending on records of the student's learning, so that the learning is continuous and uninterrupted. The primary and intermediate sector seemed to have managed this function well, but some students believed that their records had not been used effectively by secondary schools :

When I got to primary school, they found out what I'd done at all my other schools so they knew what I knew and stuff. They had heaps of ways of teaching too, that felt good for me. It filled up all those gaps for me—they found all my tests and what was wrong. The same thing happened at Intermediate—they knew what I'd done, so that made it easier. The college got information from intermediate cause they knew that way had helped me, but the work was hard—too many levels up. But AE got this information as well. The gap from intermediate to college was just too big [Ace 1].

Overall these students believed that they had been very well served by primary and intermediate schools, in spite of all their family hardship problems. In their views teachers had established effective and positive relationships with them in the main; learning and teaching styles appeared to be appropriate; the majority of the students were enjoying learning and learning effectively, several were assisted with learning and behavioural problems via various interventions, and most students reported feeling secure and safe in these schools.

Secondary Schooling

The situation changed dramatically for this group of students at secondary schools. The majority of students (93%) reported becoming disengaged and bored with learning, after several months and many started wagging classes. Sometimes wagging was seen as often the only way out of a situation that students had no influence, power or control over. There were some aspects of secondary schooling that worked against their sense of belonging and engagement. These features included the large size of the schools, the structure and ways secondary schools are organised with constantly changing time-tables, different teachers for each class, an impersonal culture and 'chalk and talk' style of teaching.

Sometimes the loose structure (constantly changing classes) was destabilising for these students and offered new freedoms which were too tempting:

It was real easy to wag from sec school and then it became a habit. [Lush]

You could wag a class and turn up at the next one and they wouldn't know—used to forge notes. You can get away with things there. I liked my first term but it got boring at lunch time—walked around talking at free time and then classes were boring—made you want to go wagging and get high [Jerry]

Some found it unsettling to have multiple changes of teachers and classrooms:

It was a big change to come to secondary school. I found it hard at first changing teachers and classes. [Colin].

Relationships with teachers

For many students secondary school became untenable because of the lack of, or negative, relationships with teachers:

I had a problem with male teachers trying to tell me to do something. The way they spoke to me. Don't respect me, so I don't respect you [Bob Down].

College—I hated it. Teachers always grumpy, picking on me. Just strict-as. Picked on my uniform, behaviour and just some stupid things really. Thought they over-reacted. Just little things. Like once, I threw paper, got warning [John Doe]

I just did 1 or 2 terms at College. I went up north, my sister is there. I just dropped out altogether. College was dumb. Not interested in the work. I hated all the teachers—didn't like any. They're grumpy all the time. I didn't really go to class [Nate].

Trouble would happen if I don't like someone... just happens. If I don't like someone that's it. Sometimes it would be about teachers. I know how it feels—I get pissed off. Sometimes it's about how they treat me. I hate people treating me different in front of other people. I don't like talking to teachers in front of lots of people, like in class. The teachers I don't get on with are unfair to me—I just ignore those teachers. [Anaru]

One or two teachers just hated me, so would send me out when I got to their class. They just didn't like me. [Method]

A perceived lack of expectations was sometimes part of the disrespect students commented on:

The teacher always picked on me—the maths teacher—because she thought I was the type of girl who wouldn't achieve anything. For two years I didn't do much maths. The teacher didn't like me so I couldn't be bothered going to her class. [Naomi]

Max had been a successful student who had been accelerated by a year at a full primary. When he got to college (Year 7–13 College) he was moved down a year because he was a year younger than other students:

It was a big change between primary and secondary. More responsibilities, harder to make new friends. Didn't know any people there and was separated from the only friend I had. Felt pretty lost—was a bit scared by it all. Having more freedom was part of the problem—I was used to more rules and stuff. Teachers were meaner there, they got straight into the work. I got over it and realised they wouldn't change. There were some teachers I was really good friends with, but others hated me and I hated them too. I'd talk to teachers and interact like they were friends... some teachers were fine with this and some didn't like it. In the end I'd wag the classes where the teachers didn't like me. [Max]

A number of students reported verbal abuse from teachers and staff:

I was at college one term and one day. Me and my mates were smoking and I got in trouble with the principal—he said some stuff about my family and I didn't like it. I decided I didn't want to be here. Tried to burn the east block down but it just burnt the bushes down because it was damp. Got dobbed in by some boys who were wagging and smoking in the bushes, who saw us. Principal didn't like my older brother and he dissed me because I was wagging and he said 'you are just like your brother.' I thought he was here to help us—not take us down. **Shit teachers here, me and my mate were getting hassled for being lesbians and the teacher didn't stop the kids— just said ignore it.** We would walk out of class. Got stood down in first term for fighting, then on first day back I got caught fighting again, so got expelled. Most fighting is because kids dis my mum and put me down. I'm good at looking after myself. Hated all the Deans and most of the teachers here. Liked one teacher at 'P' College. Teachers not interested to find out about my life. [Tweety]

The teacher called me stupid and then I got angry and I didn't think about what I was saying when I swore at her. I walked home afterwards and got into trouble from mum. [Kahlia]

It was apparent from the students' accounts of their behaviour that they would present challenges and frustrations to most teachers. It is also harder for secondary teachers to forge significant relationships with the large numbers of students that they are typically required to teach in a week. There are structural reasons that contribute to difficulties in engaging these challenging students, discussion of which is beyond the scope of this study.

Views on approaches to teaching and learning in secondary schools

Students reported that their teachers in secondary schools tended to rely on a restricted repertoire of teaching approaches with, what they saw, to be an excessive reliance on writing.

Only thing is the teachers give us quite a lot of writing to do. I would like to do more practical work at school rather than sitting down writing. In English we just sit and write all the time [Kahlia].

Many students said they found learning hard at secondary school and that the gulf between their skill level and what was being required of them was too great. They thought that they were expected to jump or close that gap on their own.

I didn't really like school since the end of primary school. During Year 9 I would go to school then leave throughout the day—I'd only go to PE. It was too much work.—I couldn't cope with it all and there was too much learning. All the homework and everything sucked. It was a big change from primary school. I'd heard it was hard but didn't think it'd be that hard. I just couldn't do the work. By the time exams came around at the end of the year it was like "Nah!" and then there was even more work at the start of year 10 for the next lot of exams. [Matt]

Teachers weren't listening to me and that's when I got really angry, frustrated. Would wag after that, picking fights. I wanted to talk to the teachers about the work—didn't understand the work. They would wait for ages before they came over. I'd get upset and walk out. I'd wait like 20min and it was frustrating and everyone else was nearly finished—I'd just take off. [Bob]

Most of the time the teachers would say 'keep trying'. One day I had a teacher who kept saying it, and I said she wouldn't help me cause she didn't know the answer either, and then I left the class. I just didn't want to hear another 'Keep trying' [Anaru]

Only went for a month and a half. I was just wagging, walking around corridors during the day and the work was too hard for me. Mainly not doing my work and wagging that got me to AE. Biggest change in my life for school was coming to secondary school. I felt stink cause I knew the work would probably be too hard for me to do. When I was first going I didn't know how I was going to cope so I just walked around the corridors and stayed out of the class.

I didn't really get any attention from teachers here. I didn't really know any teachers at college and I don't think there was a teacher there that I could communicate with. It felt different and hard. At college the teacher writes on the board, tells you what to do then tells you to get into it. But they don't really help you. The teachers treated me well—but not how I wanted to be treated to get help with my work. They didn't understand me and I couldn't tell them. **They told me I had to learn to do it without help** but I couldn't, they said 'ask for help only when you're stuck', but I couldn't do it. I didn't want them doing my work for me but I needed more help. I was dragging the teachers into doing my work for me, but I wanted them to explain it much more to me so I could do it. The teacher would tell you what to do but then you don't get any help. You just gotta sit there looking bored and they get angry. [Ace 1]

This student had even worked out what needed to happen to get him back on track with his learning, but he also could understand the limitations of the secondary schooling system:

"The way they did the work wasn't attractive to me—it wasn't done the way I wanted to work. If there was a teacher that could have given me 1-1 time that might have helped. I'm not saying that it would of, cause I know they didn't have enough time to do it...

they had lots of other stuff to do. It would have been hard for the teacher to do 1–1 for everyone [Ace 1].

Harder to ask teachers at schools cause they'll go and tell all the other teachers about you (that you were dumb or something)...Normally at college they'd just give you the worksheet and you were meant to go off and do it. I never used to learn like that. They'd have to explain it to me before I could do it. Biggest change [primary to secondary] was that there were hardly any teachers at college and they were always off with other students helping them out. You didn't really get a chance to talk to them or ask them questions. With most of the teachers if you hadn't finished during class you'd have to stay in and do it. Maybe they thought I was slack or lazy...I'd talk to my cousins and they would help me with my work, it helped a bit. [Tom Lee]

Student views on relevancy of curriculum content

Some students commented on preferring to learn by doing practical activities:

We used to do technology and cooking and sewing at intermediate. That was cool. Year 7 or 8. It was hands on. Teachers treated us like kids. At College you're treated like an adult, but we're too young, trying to do it too fast, we're not ready. [Method]

Another particularly perceptive student thought secondary school classes needed to be more about practical concerns, in preparation for the world outside schools:

I think they are teaching the wrong classes—they should have classes on money. That would be a good class, because money is just a big circle. Everyone just works, pays taxes, pays fines, pays bills, buys food—and then they go back to work. It's just a big circle. They should teach more adult things—practical—we get taught our driving licenses here at AE [Will].

Students' dis-regulated behaviour at secondary

Where levels of frustration rose for these students, they would often erupt with inappropriate language or behaviour, and teachers would deal with the problem by removing them from the classroom or the learning situation. As one student explained, this did not help them learn:

If kids get into trouble here they get two warnings and then pulled out of class and put in isolation. It doesn't really work because you are getting pulled out of class and it doesn't help your work—it is punishment, but not learning. [Kahlia]

Pacific Islands students found the lack of connection with teachers particularly difficult. Both of the following students are Tongan:

Teachers at that school don't know much about the Island students. Our life boundaries are different from the Palangi boundaries. That's why I like 'Course' (AE) because we don't have home-work, and because we do it all in one day and the work is easy. At college I used to go home, I make something to eat, I clean the house, I help my parents do whatever they need, and then I do my home-work—no matter how late it is. [Naomi]

I didn't do much learning there. At secondary school I go to at least 5 classes, and the teachers just do what they have to do and they don't really care about what you want to do. [Sam]

While some schools may have successful strategies for helping their “at risk” students to stay connected, schools had not been able to keep the participants in this study on-track. There were examples of strategies that however well-intentioned, were not going to provide a long term solution, as evidenced by the teacher who reportedly tried to manage Matt's behaviour by lowering expectations and tolerating behaviour that was unacceptable for other students

I didn't really talk to any teachers about how hard the work was. Did have a deal with one teacher that I could eat and listen to music if I did my work, but it didn't really work—other classmates got jealous and I didn't really do any work. Did feel good that someone was trying to help me out. They tried to keep me at the school—one of the Deans thought I should stay. He was trying to help me out and keep me on the right track. He'd try and help me out when I got into trouble. Felt good to have someone there who could stick up for me. [Matt]

Students were appreciative when individuals made efforts to connect with and to help them.

The principal is really cool up at the college—works really hard to get on with the young kids and talk to them. [Reuben]

Two teachers would help me out if I got behind [Method]

Actions that led to students' exclusion from secondary schools

As part of the interview we asked students how they had come to be excluded from school, and why they were sent to AE centres. Many reported that when their frustrations reached a peak, they lashed out violently and threw things (chairs, scissors), fought, bullied teachers and other students, or wagged school.

College was a waste of time. I wagged school. My problems started here. The kids, the teachers and the learning was what made me get into fights. The counsellor said AE would be better. She was the only person who talked to me about my problems. I was just smashing up the school aye, and having fights and things. They (other students) were just shit stirring and I couldn't take it anymore. I was having problems with learning. I'd just started 'N' College as a third former –I kept on swearing at teachers and started to throw things round like scissors. Swore at the principal. [Robert]

Others were expelled for drinking or smoking drugs and cigarettes, sniffing glue, tagging and vandalism. Some, for more serious offences, such as when Tweety tried to burn down the classroom. The following student had done the most serious thing in our cohort:

I was sent here because I was wagging class—not doing well. I threatened the shop-keeper over the road with a machete. Had up on charges—went to Youth Justice for 5 weeks then did 200 hours of community work, cleaning outside of a villa. Parents weren't too happy. First charge I've ever had. That day I had trouble with mum in the morning, and I grabbed the machete on my way out the door, and when my friend got a hiding from the shop-keeper down the road, I pulled out the machete and swung out twice but missed [Jerry]

Fifteen percent of students reported being excluded for truancy issues only, where no violence was involved. There were some cases where the 'offence' was seen by the student as unfair, where there had been one incident, with no warnings (Naomi fighting her bullies out of class), and others who said all they did was swear at teachers (Kahlia, Mere). Secondary schools make decisions about keeping and excluding students using principles of natural justice, but to these students there appeared to be little appreciation of how that worked.

The next story illustrates how a student seemed to disappear off a school's radar for a whole year, without any attempt being made to find out where she was or what help could be given to get her back to school. Mudz is a very bright, intelligent girl who was kept home by her parents to look after her four year old sister for a year, against her wishes. When she returned to school the next year, she was excluded for truancy:

I stayed home for a whole year (2007) looking after my 4 year old sister. Mum and dad had to go to work—don't know why they didn't put her in kindergarten. I felt really, really bad because I wanted to go back to school. I begged them to let me do correspondence. The best school I've been to was xxxx. I went to two intermediates. Two cool teachers there. I was learning the same rate as other kids. I was happy at school. I wasn't confident –like speeches in front of the whole class, but I kept up with the other kids in reading and maths. I didn't have teacher aides, but got some reading recovery help, but then I caught up. So my learning was OK until I took the year off last year. Now I feel real dumb—I feel way behind in my maths now. At least I wasn't in school and wagging [Mudz].

This student's parents had made a judgment call that reflected their value system, where the safety and care of a younger child was considered more important than the older child's education, and

where it is likely poverty was a factor in both parents having to return to work. In such a situation, the interests of students should be paramount—in Mudz’s view she had been further penalised for a situation that was beyond her control.

Non-educational interventions

The main non-educational intervention mentioned at secondary school by 30 percent of the students was counselling. About 20% of the students who mentioned having school counselling, said it was not effective for them:

Mum tried to help me lots—she got me lots of counselling but I went thru heaps of counsellors. They were no good—some didn’t want to listen, it was too hard to cope with me, some told my mum they couldn’t take any more [Rose]

Two students hated other students seeing them go for counselling in school time:

I’m getting counselling. I did it thru my social worker -she has set it up and I’ve had one session and it will be useful. At school I had counselling but I didn’t feel comfortable cos people can see you going in and out [Pink].

The social welfare kept visiting me during school hours and I didn’t like it—that got me angry and I kept taking it out on other people. I wasn’t handling it. Started fighting at intermediate school—not primary. I got stood down 4 times. Almost got expelled. Had heaps of counselling here but it wasn’t useful. [Tweety]

Others found their relationships with counsellors false, and the strategies suggested unrealistic:

Counselling –that’s dumb I don’t like it, it makes me angrier—don’t like people asking me hard out personal questions and stuff if I don’t even know them. And they don’t really help. The strategies they give you don’t work—unless you have hard out self control. I’d rather sort it out myself [Superman].

After leaving school at 13 my friends were there for me, we talked, we were in the same situation—our families didn’t approve of us leaving school at such a young age. I was being bullied. Didn’t want to commit suicide. I did counselling, that was supposed to help me and the bully, but they didn’t do anything about that. I didn’t feel I should be talking to someone I didn’t even know, didn’t make sense to me. [Samantha]

Only four students at secondary school reported positive experiences with counselling help. Tweety’s school counsellor stood up for her at her exclusion meeting; Lush said her school counsellor was cool; Robert’s college counsellor was the only person who talked to him about his problems; and Ace 1 talked about a teacher at intermediate who had assisted with his behaviour, and a college counsellor who supported his change to Alt Ed and worked with his family.

Summary

All but three of the AE students we interviewed had not encountered a good match between their own needs and their experiences at secondary school. The majority of the cohort of students we interviewed was not disengaged from learning before they reached secondary school. A quarter had started to become so at intermediate, but only one had been excluded from intermediate. For almost all of the participants schooling began to unravel soon after entering the secondary sector. For some it was a term, for others a couple of terms and a few survived for a whole year. Most of the students in our cohort were 14–15 years old.

As we have described there were many reasons for this disengagement:

- Many students found secondary schools too big and too impersonal. They described feeling lost and socially disconnected from their friends;
- Others found the size of secondary schools with more students, opened up more possibilities for trouble, peer pressure, bullying, gang fighting, etc.
- They found the constantly changing classrooms and teachers disorientating and destabilising;
- Many thought that their teachers made no attempt to get to know them or try to find out what was causing their problems¹³;
- Most found the work was too hard and above the level they were working at, suggesting that the data from their previous schools had not been used to ensure that teaching was pitched at the appropriate instructional level.
- There was resistance to the limited pedagogical approaches used by secondary teachers, with too much focus on writing;
- Very few students appeared to be offered educational interventions;
- Apart from one rural college, students did not report that there had been strategies/programmes put in place to address their learning and behavioural needs;
- For those identified with emotional or psychological problems, school counsellors were in the main not perceived to be effective¹⁴.
- When students chose to use the only option they had any control over (wagging), there did not appear to be effective systems to intervene quickly before it became a pattern¹⁵.

¹³ Our advisory group at Challenge 2000 agreed with this statement whole-heartedly for the majority of secondary teachers, but said there was often one teacher who did make an effort to get to know them, and they added that they did all the school work for that teacher, showing a sense of agency and choice these students used quite discriminately and purposively.

¹⁴ The Challenge 2000 advisory group added an insight about lack of trust of counsellors especially round issues of confidentiality. Several described how other teachers had been told about their personal details divulged only to the counsellor.

¹⁵ The Challenge 2000 students said that their schools often did find out they were wagging early on, but that effective interventions were not put in place to get them re-engaged. Instead ineffective and ‘hassling’ types of interventions such as a daily report, or detentions were used to deter them from wagging.

Once the student had exhibited a problem serious enough for the school to exclude or expel them (anti-social behaviour or extended truancy), the disengagement from learning had probably happened at least 3 months to a year earlier (by our calculations). This raises questions about the efficacy of this sector's ability to do their job of teaching these students. Our data is indicating both a presence and an engagement gap, but that the engagement gap occurs first. Students in our study, disengaged from learning first and then wagged. The schools (apart from one clear example in our study) reportedly failed to notice, or they noticed but did nothing to prevent the disengagement, and they only picked up on the presence problem after extended truancy.

The international literature endorses the fact that engagement is related to connection between the student and the school. As Levin (2007, p.3) points out:

A large amount of research shows that students' sense of connection to the school is a prime factor in their persistence. Over and over again students who dropped out report feeling that nobody cared or made any attempt to keep them in school; indeed, often they felt encouraged to leave. Similarly, the literature on resilience (e.g. as discussed in Levin, 2004) shows how powerfully students can be affected by even a single adult who they see as believing in and supporting them. No amount of change in curriculum or policy will compensate for school environments that students, especially those with the greatest challenges, find alienating and unsupportive.

Our study also reinforces what previous studies such as Russell Bishop's (2007) *Te Kōtahitanga* study have told us, about the importance of relationships in learning. He emphasizes the relational aspects of teaching and the importance of this for teachers knowing where students are at in terms of their learning. Our students considered that their teachers did not pick up on their disengagement, which resulted in inaction in relation to putting in place effective interventions to alleviate the disengagement.

The second problem is an organisational or systems level problem, where at the school level there appeared to be ineffective systems in place to identify and stop wagging when it first occurred. The first instances of wagging the students told us about were the first obvious signals that disengagement was becoming serious. Many spoke of asking for help repeatedly from teachers in class when they didn't understand the work, but being inadequately helped or even just passed over. They reported feeling frustrated, stupid, dumb, helpless and failing. Each successive episode reinforced these feelings leaving them further and further behind, feeling more foolish in front of their peers, and more inadequate. Not turning up for class became a better option for them than having their self esteem damaged further.

6. Students' learning experiences in AE centres

Most of the students were sent to AE by their secondary school, almost as a kind of punishment for failing to fit in to mainstream secondary schools. One student however, found out for herself about AE centres, after truanting from school for a while and becoming despondent about her future:

One day, I just decided to ring up WINZ and ask them if there was anything I could do, like a part-time job or something I could learn from, something that could benefit myself. I wanted to get away from the whole south [city] side type of life—I'd experienced all that stuff at such a young age, I decided to change my life around, try to do something better. My family still couldn't see that at the time, they were like 'you're going no-where', and all that. But then when I found this course, when WINZ gave me the number for this course, it was like good. I just rang up myself, I told my dad that I got an appointment. He was happy-as. He didn't know that young kids my age could get into courses like this. My dad wasn't gonna ring up for me, because he thought it was going to be a waste of time—thought there was nothing to do...Now my dad can't wait to get my report. He used to look at my school report and think "what's this about?" And now, he's like "my daughter is improving like everything". Like my whole life has turned around from coming to this course. When I first came, I looked forward to smoke breaks. But now I can accept boundaries in my life—this course has opened up my eyes heaps. [Samantha]

Most of the students knew very little about AE centres before they came, so did not know what to expect. Sometimes a school counsellor had explained about the centre at the decision-making meeting, but most of the students arrived rather warily on their first day. However, 100 percent of the students we interviewed said they enjoyed being at their AE centres. In the transcripts we found there were two major themes for why they enjoyed AE. Firstly, they felt comfortable in a number of ways, which when we analysed the quotes, was all about effective relationships with both their tutors and other students. Secondly they were learning again—wanting to learn and learning effectively. Some in fact were feeling they needed more learning than they were getting from their particular AE centre.

We have divided this chapter into two sections—relationships and learning—and illustrated what the students thought, using their own statements. Relationships comes first as it is the foundation stone upon which learning can occur, because without effective relationships, effective learning will not occur for these students.

Relationships

The majority of young people we spoke to were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences at their respective Alternative Education centres. Central to these young people's accounts were a sense of belonging, and the quality of the relationships they had developed with their teachers, tutors, and peers. There was a feeling that the centres and the people associated with them had created a safer and more understanding environment in which these young people could start to address some of the issues they had been dealing with at school and at home. The confidence and pride these young people exhibited in telling us about their alternative education centres and the people they shared them with was in stark contrast to how they had described some of their mainstream (intermediate and secondary) educational experiences.

Relationships with staff at the AE centre

At the heart of these positive experiences were the connections that these young people had made with their teachers and tutors at the centres. Many of these young people had described having poor relationships with many of their intermediate and secondary school teachers yet in many instances had spoken positively of relationships with some of their primary school teachers. It was evident that these alternative education teachers/tutors shared qualities that young people had valued in their positive relationships with primary teachers. There was a shared sense amongst these young people that the teachers and tutors they encountered at the centres were genuinely interested in supporting and assisting them in their lives, not just their education.

When I came here I was still around the same people [gangs]. The tutors here are real cool they could tell the kind of stuff you are going through. They helped me—they sit down and talk to you about problems and stuff and they really care and help you out. [Sam]

The generally non-traditional approach to relationship building that alternative education teachers and tutors took, also seemed effective.

Here, the tutors are more like friends than teachers. You can tell they really want to help us instead of doing it just for the money. And the people are different here. I like it. I'm familiar with the place. [Jessica]

I reckon this place is cool. The tutors make it cool, more than the work and activities. They know how to treat us. Treat us differently. They're really funny and all that. Sometimes they'll give us what we want but not all the time. Talk to us differently, feels like they're talking to me like we're mates rather than teachers. [Nate]

Teachers here treat me different. It's way better. [E-Rep]

In some cases the teachers and tutors were from the same culture as these young people. For the following young woman it was something that had been missing in her experiences with mainstream teachers.

This is heaps better than school and the teachers here are way better—get along with them better. Closer to my culture, understand us kids more. Mainstream teachers didn't know me as a person, or are interested in me. [Sonny]

The relationships described were far more relaxed and friendship orientated than those seen with teachers in mainstream schooling yet this did not compromise the centre educator's ability to maintain good behaviour at the centre. In fact by focusing on the idea of 'respecting others' they had created a powerful incentive for encouraging good behaviour. It was an approach that resonated strongly with many of these young people including this young man.

It's about respect—the tutors say: "if you don't respect our rules, you don't respect us". That made me think. They make me laugh every day. Everyone shook my hand the first day I came here. [Jerry]

While encouraging and supporting mutual respect between teachers, tutors and peers at the centre, it was important there were also clear rules in place, especially related to drug use and inappropriate verbal and/or physical behaviour.

Pretty easy here, just respect one another. You get push-ups for punishment, and have to do 10 laps around the van if you swear. If you show up stoned, you get taken straight home. People don't do that, people respect the people here. It's easier to get along with the people here, they know how it feels. [Nate]

However these rules were commonly viewed by students as reasonable.

We have rules but they are fair—not too strict. [Lush]

When necessary teachers/tutors would discipline students. However their methods were consistent with the focus being on respect. It was an approach that one young man appreciated and felt comfortable with.

When they tell you off they don't do it in front of everyone, so you don't get embarrassed. They just take you aside and talk to you about it. It's a better way to treat us... like how my parents would do it instead of telling me off in front of my brothers and that. [Bob]

In visiting these centres we also spoke to teachers and tutors informally about their own educational experiences. We found that several had had similar experiences of school and learning to these young people. This helped them build relationships with these young people as they had an understanding of what they had been through and had their own stories to share.

Safety

Young people told us that they saw their centres as safe places to learn and socialise. It was a major attraction to these young people who had often had to deal with violence in their lives.

The rules are good—you're not allowed to swear or play fight. It feels safe here. [**Superman**]

I feel a lot safer here—you know you can come in and not get picked on—its calm and yeah easier here for me. Smaller numbers. [**Bonny**]

Feel safe and there is a structure, the tutors here are real personable—they are real serious about us. [**Sam**]

There were few, if any, reported fights at the centres in our interviews and students told us that there were strict rules about anything related to gangs. This was viewed extremely positively by young people who had been involved in gangs previously and even those who still were gang members. It seemed that the alternative education centre was a place where these young people from different places, upbringings and gangs could interact without conflict.

Not really allowed to talk about gang stuff at the centre—everyone knows to leave that stuff outside and it's safe at the centre. It's more relaxed and no fights. Feels heaps more freedom when I'm at the centre. [**Reuben**]

I can be friends with kids from other gangs here. [**Jerry**]

I've learnt more about how to deal with people, at school. I hated girls and now I can get along with them. I also like being able to make friends from other races instead of people following gangs and colours. At course we are all different but it doesn't matter, you have 'Course' in common. [**Max**]

I don't like people from the same group (gang) at the same course. That's what happened at college. Try to keep that side of my life separate from here. Probably 3 or 4 here are in different gangs. Everyone keeps it away from here. Makes it easier to come here and hang out and stuff. [**Method**]

Shared Experiences

One of the most salient themes to emerge from our interviews with young people was the effects of shared educational and life experiences. It was easier for them to open up and build friendships with peers who had similar experiences and could understand what their lives had been like.

It's been a lot easier to stay out of trouble at Alt Ed. All the kids here have been expelled or had troubles. People tell stories about the hidings they've had. Not many people actually know what we've have been through, but the other kids at the centre do...I find it hard to talk to other people as they don't really know much about what I've experienced. [**Reuben**]

Young people told us they felt more comfortable around students who had been through similar experiences of school and life.

It's kinda cool to hang out with people who had been through the same situations as I had. I felt comfortable here. [**Bob**]

I reckon it's a little bit better than school. I enjoy it and it's pretty easy to along with the people here cause they've been through pretty much exactly what I have. It feels easy to make friends here... Most of them have had teachers that mislead them and that too—that's how I make friends, people that know what I've been through and I can understand them better. [**Bob**]

It was easy to make friends [at AE]. They just come up to me and said hi. We all got something in common and we all like the same things. [**Jessica**]

I like this place because it's small, I know everyone here, everyone's friendly. [**Poly**]

It's cool. Everyone that comes here has gone thru the same sort of thing as you, so you get on with them. It's easy to fit in here—you can just be yourself. [**Tweety**]

One young woman described how there was a sense of family at her centre. Having time to get to know each other and sharing their [similar] experiences of life and school helped them to develop strong relationships with their peers.

Its like one big family—we treat each other like brother and sister—we argue but like with brothers and sisters. Get to know each other's history—and it's all the same which is good—don't feel on the edge. We help each other with work and we go out places. [**GenuisOne**]

These factors helped young people develop strong relationships amongst their peers and teachers/tutors at the centres. These relationships were robust enough to weather disagreements and encourage peers to assist each other in both their social development and learning.

Young peoples social experiences at schools

In hearing how strongly young people felt about the positive social situations at their alternative education centres, we revisited the stories they told of their relationships at school. It was quickly apparent that many young people we spoke to forged friendships and associations with groups of peers at schools as a way of dealing with the transition to a new school (and social) environment. Several young people we spoke to including two who had been involved in gangs reported feeling lost, scared, and disconnected when first starting intermediate or secondary school.

I found intermediate to be really different. I didn't like it. I wasn't familiar with how it worked or anything. I was scared when I got there about meeting all those new people and I just couldn't handle it. I've got a real fear of meeting new people, like a 'social phobia'. Meeting people 1-1 is ok and small groups but big groups of people are scary. [**Henry**]

I found I could settle down when there aren't many people around. At schools there are heaps of people and it's hard. I feel more comfortable with less people around like at the AE centres I've been to. [**Tom Lee**]

We have already heard (see Chapter 6) that the majority of these young people had not developed strong relationships with their secondary school teachers. To overcome this lack of social connection, some young people described gravitating toward other young people who were feeling the same about school.

I felt pretty lost when I got to the new school. I was a bit scared by it all. I made friends in form 3 with all the other kids that were lost, didn't know what to do. They were all in the same class. I started to make friends with the people that were on their own. I didn't want them to feel alone like I did. [**Max**]

Similarly to how young people described their feelings about alternative education centres, there was a desire to connect with people who were sharing similar experiences to gain confidence and a sense of safety, by belonging to a social group. However in mainstream settings the majority of these young people were identifying with, and connecting to peers who were exhibiting disengaged behaviour.

I started hanging out with the naughty people. Truant, smoking, not really gang, just boys hanging out. I would go to only two classes a day. [**Bob Down**]

I didn't do much learning at secondary school. My friends didn't care about it. [**Sam**]

Bad role models really. Following others, mainly the older ones and if you were the toughest then you were popular. You wanted to follow them and do what they did so they accepted you. Most were interested in other stuff—not school though. [**Bob**]

While some young people we spoke to felt they were successful in making a wide range of friends, there was still a sense they were more comfortable with people they saw as similar to themselves.

Lots of them [friends] weren't into school work. But I had a lot of friends throughout the school. Not just people in the gangs. I got along with everyone but chose to hang out with people of my own race (due to gang influences). It made me feel more comfortable being with these people at school. [**Max**]

Perhaps these stories from young people partially explain how groups of disengaged students form within schools. Driven by a need to 'find their place' or 'fit in' young people who are struggling within the school environment seem to be looking for others who are feeling the same. We suggest that students involved in gangs and/or groups of students with ongoing behavioural issues might be considered the outcome of a critical mass of young people who are disconnected and disinterested in school as they are currently experiencing it.

7. Learning at AE centres

The majority (93%) of the students we interviewed said they enjoyed *learning* at their AE centres. There were three students who said while they enjoyed what they learnt, they were not learning enough, and in our view they should have been in mainstream schooling with the full range of learning opportunities.

Students told us the way tutors taught them was how they preferred to learn (pedagogical approach); they talked about what they learnt (curriculum), and it's relevancy to their lives and interests; and they talked about the progress they were making.

The pedagogical approach offered by AE

The biggest difference from secondary school was the small class size and the one-to-one help tutors gave students, giving them time to understand and do the work, and checking that they understood.

It's easy to learn here. They sit down with you and help you. I feel calm here and I don't get stressed out about making a mistake—they help take me through it and read it. They take time to come and help us, are interested in helping us get back to school. They are different to other teachers I've had... they actually listen and try to help me do my work and also find what I want to do in life. I didn't get that in my other schools... I would like to be doing some more hands on type things like woodwork... but the other work is OK and I'm getting help for it. My reading is quite low but they have helped me get my grades up at AE—have pushed me along. I'm trying to learn how to read. I had R/R at primary. Learning is difficult—I need people to explain it and help out when I'm not coping. They say my work is getting better [Bob].

We get more help from the teachers—she doesn't yell at us—she just talks to us. And we get more breaks [Colin].

I can do the work here. The school work is easier—they teach you better with 1-1 action and that's what I'm used to. At college the teacher writes on the board, tells you what to do, then tells you to get into it. But they don't really help you. But here (at AE) the tutors do one-to-one work with you and you can ask questions to them—they help you out. I'm getting the help that I need to learn. I would have thought that I would get help at college like I get at AE. Here they say if you need to ask anything you just say, but it wasn't like that at secondary And here there is the teacher in the class as well (3 people in the class altogether). Mum said that this place would be a good place for my learning and it's true. I've found it easier. **I think that anyone who is out of college and is having difficulties should be able to come here.** [Ace 1]

Ace 1's last sentence is a grim indicator that secondary schools are not helping these learners. Henry's next statement gives a vital clue about the kind of help these students need—breaking it down into manageable steps.

This place is pretty good. You learn more—I've learnt more. Less students so there is more 1-1. It's easier than having 30 kids in the class and trying to get attention. Teachers here are very different to other teachers I've had. If we don't understand the work our teachers can break it down until we do. Other teachers break it down but it's still too big. [Henry]

I can understand our tutors better than teachers at schools. They talk to us in a way that really makes us understand. They break down the flash words to words we can understand. They would draw it on the board, teachers at schools won't do that. I like it so much. [Samantha]

“Flash” words for Samantha are words she hasn't come across before—that she may not have the cultural capital of our education system to understand.

I like the teachers here—they come down to your level, they don't force us, but encourage us. I thought this would be just like school but its not. It's cool. [Tweety]

Encouragement was often mentioned and is a huge component for these students' damaged self esteem about their own learning abilities. Some of the students with learning disorders or delayed learning were being taught with appropriate strategies, such as the Toe by Toe approach mentioned earlier:

I'm a real slow learner. I know I am. I'm a hands-on learner. I find it easier learning and doing not like writing on a piece of paper. Reading at AE—we have a book and you sound out stupid words. They're not words, they're letters. You sound them out. Read sentences. A couple of people in my class do this. [Polly]

Curriculum

The basic numeracy and literacy curriculum areas were covered by each AE centre at the appropriate levels for students, but some centres offered a wider variety of subjects, including NCEA unit standards. However, not all centres offered NCEA opportunities to their students.

Maths and reading are at the right level. Its easier to remember, my reading is better now, confidence is heaps, heaps, heaps better—one of the bigger things. Now, I do pretty much all of the activities—didn't in the past. Doing some NCEA standards. I'm doing alright [John Doe]

We have like different periods—maths, English, social, technology. Just like at a more relaxed level. Not heaps of people, its easier to concentrate. Peaceful here. In social studies we do debates; in technology we're building a couch and we're going to leave it here, it's one of the options. We do unit standards in maths and English—I've got a few. [Bob Down].

Learning here is cool—maths, English, literacy. Feel as though I am keeping up because we learn things we don't know. Not doing NCEA. [Lush]

On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday we have our classes—maths, English, fitness, dance music or art, cooking, and then we do something in the afternoon like ICT , technology and Te Reo and on Wednesday we go rock climbing. We go on camp to the marae at [..town]. Its mostly morning work—we do options in the afternoons or go out in the afternoons. On Thursday and Friday we do life skills and outdoor ed.—we change around. Beauty therapist comes in for Life skills. All learning is good here—its easier level. Secondary school was just so boring, so I didn't do anything. [Superman]

Relevancy of learning

The kind of learning offered was more relevant to students' lives and of interest to them, and the learning styles used were more practical, which appealed to many of these students.

A lot of the work we do here is more practical. We do money skills and stuff in maths. We are doing a unit on forms for English—filling them out and stuff. Its stuff we'll use, like you use maths everyday no matter what job you have. More useful stuff than what I was learning at college. You do different units every couple of weeks so it's more variety. Like for maths, they mix it up but we still do geometry and the other parts. I find the spelling and reading easier here—was always pretty good at maths, but there was some stuff I hadn't learnt, so I'm filling in the gaps and stuff. It's not so controlled like school. You've got food around and you can listen to music and stuff. You still have to be quiet to let people get on with their work. Similar to school but more relaxed. I think the centre is good because even though you might not be learning heaps, it's better than learning nothing at secondary school where you wouldn't even try. How things are setup here makes it easier to try and do it. [Matt]

They have the right subjects here, just the basics that we need in everyday life. My reading has improved from last year. Reading is hard sometimes, but my tutors help me a lot. I can read a form. Reading a long book is hard. [Jessica]

Learning makes more sense here—it has more direction and I can see what I'll use it for (work). Before getting to AE I hated learning—sitting in class, writing down all the notes and stuff. Couldn't really see how I'd use what we were supposed to be learning. Now learning is more important cause I'm at that stage where I'm preparing for work...I want to get a job. [Henry]

Teachers here (AE) will ask what I'm interested in and they go through the careers book and they get together all the work/credits etc you need to do it. You just read through it and do the credits and you're ready to go. Since I'm year 10 I can do credit work and hold them till next year. Next year I would have nearly finished level 1. Feels pretty cool to have that head start, I see all the other year tens around and they don't even know you are doing it. I've done OSH units, English and maths, and formal letter writing and some other bits and pieces. We do work on the computer as well, mainly writing and graphics and stuff bits of art and things. [Reuben]

I like reading if I get into it –thinking and making sense of stuff. I like learning more about how to do work. [E-Rep]

Progress being made

Students were having success with their learning again and were enthusiastic, and proud of the progress they were making. This was possible because of the formative assessment that was being used by teachers, so that they were working at appropriate levels.

Good how they test you at the start of the year (at AE) to see what level you are at and then give you work that matches it. Means you can see yourself progressing. Teachers up at the school just throw a book in front of your face and say that's what you're doing today. But here they talk to you about it—they want you to progress on with your work. Here I do the work but up at school I would have been bombing my book and talking to mates until class finished...In a month I would have done more than I would in a whole term up at school. You barely even know you are doing it!.. It was too easy to slack up at school. [Reuben]

One student had already completed an impressive number of unit standards:

Look at how many credits I have got compared to my friend at College—I've got way more. [*Shows interviewer her CV*] (See appendix C). I even have some level 2 credits. I'm doing NCEA unit standards. I've been here (AE) 18 months. [Pam]

The following summarised story illustrates how important it is for these students to be learning something they are interested in. Sonny's story is about his passion for learning about cars, which ironically, started with his stealing of cars! It also shows how he has the capacity and competencies to learn independently, when he is interested and motivated:

Primary was when I used to be good, always went to school and stuff. I liked it and there were good teachers there. I didn't mind learning at primary—I didn't mind doing it, but when I got to intermediate I didn't like it, and secondary was worse. At intermediate school there was this group we hung out with, stealing cars. Stolen over 100 cars. Mum got sick of the police coming round. I want to get my licence—I've read the road code four times and done the test on the internet three times.

Secondary school—I didn't like it—the learning was too hard and the teachers were idiots. Anger was the main problem because teachers made me angry and kept getting me annoyed because of the way they treated me. [*Continued over page*]

I didn't have a clue what AE was, but it is way better than school. Its not quite up to the standard that college can do, but its more understandable to us. The teachers here explain, not like the secondary teachers who won't break it down to make it easier—but they do here. I ask if I can do maths most of the time, I have a little trouble with punctuation and spelling. I don't like reading books—I only read books about cars. I want to just do the subjects that I need to do that I want to do. Now that I'm here I'm doing the subjects I need to do for what I want to do.

I just love my cars! Just everything to do with cars—the sound system, the performance. I want to be a mechanic just so I know how I can fix my engine when it breaks down, be able to do it up to go faster, being able to rebuild it—put new bigger and stronger parts in it. One of the teachers here said that if I can do well in my maths and literacy they will try to get me into a mechanics place once a week. I want to be able to finish school here to get on a course straight away. I don't want to go back to school. I'd rather learn what I need to do to be able to get the qualifications to go straight into a mechanics course. I want a job working on cars my whole life. I want to get an education so I can work on cars. Got my own goals now that I want to achieve them and work on cars, so my friends won't influence me now.

Stealing cars was what made me start liking cars. Once we moved up here my brother got a car and that's when I started working on cars. I know the main points on how an engine works and how to install a sound system with amps and stuff. We taught ourselves how to do it. We started off by looking on Trade Me—at the boy-racer cars, and seeing what they do to their cars. Me and him never had a clue about what the parts were. We got some performance books and started reading the whole books. We've got a computer at home. [Sonny]

If ever there was a story to illustrate the common sense of the Schools Plus policy, it seems to us, that this is it.

Limitations of AE

In spite of the success stories of AE, sixty-one percent of the students told us, in a number of different ways, that their AE centres were not resourced sufficiently to provide the quantity and quality of catch-up learning they needed. This next young woman was running out of unit standards available to her:

Miss B [teacher] needs to have more access to more unit work. I'm running out of stuff to do. I was going to go back to the college, but there are too many teachers who listen to the gossip, so I decided it wasn't worth it. Nit-picking about uniforms—I don't like that. [Pam]

The student who had been kept home by her parents for a year was finding AE limiting and it was actually putting her further behind in her education:

Int: Are you catching up here (at AE)?

Mudz: No, it's been too boring. We don't learn enough—we only study 3 days a week (Mon–Wed). Thursday is quiz day and Friday is go-out day. I feel anxious about this. I'm only here to learn the most I can, not muck around and go out. I keep telling them the breaks are too long, I just want to hurry up and get back into class. They don't do unit standards here...I wouldn't mind starting in the 3rd form again. I'd like to go. [Mudz]

Some AE centres were very poorly resourced and several did not even have computers for the students to use.

We don't do unit standards here. The maths and English we do here feels like revision—not learning new stuff. Don't use the computers here. [Will]

Another student wanted NCEA unit standards work for future employment opportunities:

There's enough opportunities for learning—but I want more job experience stuff. No job skills stuff at AE. Can't get NCEA anymore, because I can't go back to school. I got 10 NCEA credits from last year, while I was at college. The work at college wasn't that hard, I just didn't want to learn, but my attitude towards learning has changed since being at activity centre and AE. It would be more positive if I can get NCEA credits. [Method]

One of the AE students we talked to was a reasonably new immigrant from the Pacific Islands. His behaviour problems were the 'reason' he was sent to AE, but his main problem, it seemed to us, was that he needed more ESOL help. He was intelligent and had done well in primary school in Samoa and his parents' expectation was that he would do the same here. When he arrived in New Zealand in 2005 he did not speak much English, but he had learnt quickly and could speak to us and make himself understood perfectly well. However he had not had help with English and his behaviour reflected this. It appears that the secondary school found AE to be an easier alternative than giving him the help he deserved:

It's better learning here—English and maths. Some of it's easier. The English is pretty hard. Can read it but writing is harder. The order to put things down is hard. Think I should be getting more English—need help with English as it is my second language. I need to listen to the teachers more. Not fight. Mum and dad said I shouldn't have come here—I felt no good. They said if I don't get a good report to go back to school, I will have to go back to Samoa—live with my grandma and grandpa. [Eugene]

Another student knew she wasn't able to get the credits at her AE centre she needed for her desired career:

Here the learning is pretty easy—I'm doing enough learning, but would like to do more English—doing maths level 1. If I want my dream job—air hostess, but my mum thinks I won't get it because of all my stuff with the police and school. Don't know what I need to do for NCEA to be one. I need some credits for my job but I can't do credits here. [Tweety]

For the last three weeks I've been asking for extra work so I can get my standards up, to get back to school. My parents are happier than when I was at college. I think these places are really good. I think some people think that when they get kicked out of school it's the end of their career, but they can come here [Tom].

Several students mentioned wanting to go to university:

AE is showing me that I can get to university—that was my main goal since primary... The school work at AE reminded me about what I liked about school. I enjoyed learning at primary and intermediate. Missed all that learning during 3rd form due to wagging and stuff. [Max]

Interventions

The main and most effective educational intervention these students received at AE was one-to-one tuition. Some also received phonetic instruction such as the Toe by Toe programme to help with literacy. However, the main type of interventions mentioned by the students at AE were various counselling programmes run by different community groups or government agencies to help with their drug and alcohol problems and psychological problems. Pink had counselling from CYF; Christine had anger management counselling; Will and Jerry had marae-based counselling for drug and alcohol; Method had drug counselling from a community programme; Jessica received help from a social worker; and Dillon had family mental health help.

The following students had sessions at community/ marae-based programmes:

Before I came here (AE), I didn't think about my future. Since I've been to [name of drug and alcohol programme]—it helps people like us who roam the streets, young kids and gangs and stuff. Will go to sleep over at the marae for a week and have people come in about education, drugs—it's pretty cool, given me hope. An ex-mob person who came out of jail started it. Do contraception, pregnancy, education. This programme is helping people here. [Tweety]

Counselling is helping me do better and give up the green smoking. Over at ...[Maori place name]. They don't put you down—they tell you stuff you'd want to hear, and it makes you feel good and makes you want to keep off the stuff, so I give it up. Like if you don't have education when you're older it will be hard in life, so if I gave up the stuff and went to school and I'd have a clear mind. Want to give up ciggies too [Jerry].

One young person had also been helped by a police office:

The police officer (X) was the one who got me in here—to change my ways. Cause I done three other assault charges. Stabbed someone in the calf—got in a fist-fight—Going to court next Thursday. I'm trying to make the best of it while I'm on the outside. Counselling is helping me do better and give up the green smoking. Over at 'Y' [Maori name]. They don't put you down—they tell you stuff you'd want to hear, and it makes you feel good and makes you want to keep off the stuff, so I give up. Like if you don't have education when you're older it will be hard in life, so if I gave up the stuff and went to school and I'd have a clear mind. Want to give up ciggies too. [Jerry]

There was one case however which stands out in our study, where a young woman was never offered counselling after a traumatising ordeal:

That horrible thing that happened to my sister [being raped], happened to me this year. It was one of the teachers from here (work experience outside AE). The person that taught us—the mechanics, did it and a couple of his mates. The tutors were going to move me. They talked to me and helped me. They didn't send me to a counsellor. The police came. I dropped the charges because the mechanic's dad is the president of a gang. Don't think it's fair that I had to do that. Only did that so that my family will be safe. [Polly]

Re-entering mainstream schooling again

A minority of students, as we have seen could see the advantages of re-entering mainstream schooling again, especially to do NCEA credits. However, the majority did not think their return to college would be successful and they wanted to stay in AE until they could move into a job or vocational training.

I started here this year and will stay until I turn 16 or my leaving exemption comes. [Lush]

One of the AE tutors we spoke to said there was never more than a 15 percent success rate per year in returning AE students to mainstream. From our findings it seemed that until the secondary system changes there is little point in these students returning, because they would find the same things in place, and the support they clearly need would not be forth-coming. AE is working extremely well for these students in the main, but we did not see evidence that many of these students would be able to work in the independent way required of present secondary schooling. They were going to need the continued one-to-one assistance to catch up with their learning and transition into vocational training.

The one exception to the traditional secondary model that we saw was a college's on-site/off-site scheme, which seems to be catering to the diverse range of students needing extra help more successfully than the norm. Students were able to switch from on-site to off-site and back again, as their needs dictated. Teachers from both the college and the off-site centre were working closely together and appeared to be working for the needs of the students in a holistic way. The doors had not closed for the students here, and yet there were choices for students in this

model as well, which seemed important to us. For example, Pam did not want to go back to college, so she could stay off-site and get on with doing unit standards there.

The need for more resourcing for AE does however remain a critical factor, in our opinion. The present level of funding seems to be holding some students back and preventing them access to the educational opportunities that mainstream students have of right.

Our findings in this study mirror many of the findings of an earlier Ministry of Education study (O' Brien, Thesing and Herbert, 2001) on Alternative Education, where quality indicators of AE were developed. We found students' opinions confirming the importance of the indicators in this study around the place where the programme operates, the programme curriculum and the programme providers.

8. Students' strengths, future hopes and aspirations

Just cause you had a bad life doesn't mean that your life is over. [Samantha]

Resilience

Samantha's statement sums up the highly resilient attitude we encountered with many of the AE students. In spite of many of them coming from less advantaged backgrounds, engaging in at risk behaviours and having negative learning experiences at some stage in their mainstream schooling, most of them were "bouncing back" and trying hard again with their learning at AE. Their second chance had instilled more hope for the future.

We were impressed with the way most students showed vitality, enthusiasm, and a sense of humour in the interviews. Most had a sparkle in their eyes. A few did not, and these turned out to be the students who had experienced severe trauma. In narrating her story for example, Rose (the young alcoholic) spoke in a dead-pan voice, but even so she showed a mature acceptance of her life situation, and was able to speak positively of how she had resolved certain things and was looking to the future.

Future Aspirations

Many young people spoke to us of rediscovering confidence as learners and seeing more options for their futures as a result of attending AE. The majority of these young people spoke about people encouraging them through positive reinforcement of their strengths, skills and talents. Frequently they had found or received information about how to reach their goals whether they were related to short-medium term study or long-term career options. Some had re-evaluated what they thought was possible and had set themselves some ambitious goals such as re-returning to mainstream schooling and even attending university. One young man told us how he was able to think about fulfilling the wishes of his grandfather by attending university. He had started to talk to people at the centre and plan how he could achieve this.

My granddad supports me and he would love someone to go to university from our family because no-one from our family has been to university. So through school I can work on getting to university. I want to go back to school and AE is on to it now. The church and AE have contributed 50/50 to me coming through. My goal is to get to university—I want to achieve it for my family—to see them happy. I have talked to people here to get the steps sorted out to get to university. People here believe I will get to university and keep telling me so. [Sam]

The next young woman also aspired to reach university. Her desire to succeed was driven by wanting to make her family proud and support them as best she could.

I'm going to go back to school (college)... it'll be a good opportunity for me to do better than what I did before. My dream is to go to university. Mum and dad will be proud. I'll be the first generation to do it. I always wanted to be a policewoman, but not anymore. I want to do something else. I want to look after my family, get a good job that pays good money so that I can take care of my family when they get sick and stuff, look after the little ones [Kitty].

Another young man's aspirations related to getting himself back into school to allow him to pursue becoming a mechanic. He was optimistic about his reintegration into mainstream schooling and was confident that he had a plan that would work for him:

I want to be a mechanic—plan to leave school and go to engineering school. I can do that locally. I want to stay to school till 18 (7th form) and then do the course. I've got it stuck in my head that that's what I want to do. It can take me a while to get it in my head but once I do, I'm on it. I'm working on getting back toward full days. I do full Wednesdays now and will be starting full Thursdays soon. Other than that I do half days. It rotates with the school timetable so I do full days when I have the subjects I really like. I'm looking forward to getting back to full time at school but I'm doing it over time. [Anaru]

The following young man also wanted to return to school. In his case he would need to be living with his extended family and seeing less of his parents. This was something he was willing to do to get himself back into school:

I want to get back into school next term. I want to go to another college. I'd have to go live with aunty and see my family in the weekends. I reckon I can handle not seeing my parents for 5 days a week. It will be good for me to get back into school. [Tom]

For Tom to be successful in this goal however, there should be a transition plan developed, as the onus should not be on him to manage the transition. For some young people these goals or aspirations for the future involved further learning and training yet not necessarily at school. Most were reasonably modest targets and focused on a current interest or passion.

It's pretty good knowing that you're the healthier student here, I'm probably going to go further than anyone else here because they're smoking and doing drugs and drinking, not really focused on their future. But at the moment, I'm really trying to get a good job. I want to be an undercover security guard or a security prison guard. You must be at least 21 though. I'll do a job or go on a course in the meantime. Then I'll go into a security course, get a security guard certificate. [**John Doe**]

Other young people had realised that they could be successful learners. One young man had started to develop more confidence in his ability and was considering future study that related to his interests:

I thought it would be harder to get level 1 than this. I've already get 10 credits banked and won't be starting full year 11 work till next year. I've realised that I do need to do the work even if there is heaps of it. Even if I don't think I can handle it I just give it a go and see what happens. Been quite surprised at how much I can do when I actually try. I've found that out through doing work at Alt Ed. I would definitely do more study if it related to my interests, cars and sports. [**Matt**]

The next young man had several possible options for future jobs/careers and knew what he was interested in. He had received positive feedback from his family and friends about his talents in this area:

I'd like to be a mechanic, panel beater or a fisherman. I like trying to make things. My dad works for a wreckers company and he brings home screens and electronics. I can put a CD player into a car. Friends would say that I'm good with electronics—family would ask for his help with it at home [**Tom Lee**]

Another young man spoke of wanting to achieve something with his life. His aspirations revolved around finding a job that suited him and avoiding particular outcomes in his life. He was aware that he might need to work even harder due to the repercussions of his past behaviour.

I want to do something with my life. I don't want to sit around; I want to get a job. I'm planning to get what I need at Alt Ed and then go. I don't want to be like my family. I want to get out and get a job...I've got a criminal record so have to work hard to keep job options open. [**Reuben**]

For some young people goals for the future related to having a family. In these cases young people expressed a desire to avoid the mistakes they saw their parents/whānau make in looking after themselves and their family.

I want to have kids. And don't want to go through what my mum went through with my dad. Don't want my kids to go through what I went through. As a parent, I'll make sure I'm with someone that will stay. Not be violent. Dad was really violent to mum. [**Polly**]

Some young people's goals were relatively short-term such as getting a licence and thinking about employment. At times it was evident that these young people had not yet started to think about the

future in any great detail. The goals or aspirations they voiced tended to relate to getting away from their current situations and were referred to as ‘dreams’.

I hope to be going for my restricted and maybe working and maybe level 1. I dream of travelling overseas, just wherever. Haven’t really thought of who I want to be when I’m an adult. [**Method**]

The goals of this student were perhaps unrealistic, but they indicate that he was more positive about his potential future as a result of attending AE:

Will stay here til I’m 16...might get back into secondary school. I’d like to be a Judge and I know about the courts! I’d have been a bum if I didn’t end up here. [**Whitebait**]

Students who were less optimistic about their futures

There were a few students who showed mature realism and understanding of their situations, but who were rather more pessimistic about their likely futures, such as the following:

I can imagine when I’m older, I would be in jail. Will try to control that, try to change. But it’s hard because it’s the way I’ve been brought up. But if I do go to jail, I’ll see my real dad in jail. I haven’t seen him since I was 11. [**E-Rep**]

Some students’ self esteem was very low, such as this young man, who remained unconvinced that he had any particular strengths:

Don’t know what I’m going to do in the future. Caregiver’s son has tried to talk to me. He talked to me about the army, building. Some sound interesting. Don’t know what skills I’m good at...I don’t think I’m good at nothing. Can’t remember anyone telling me I’m good at anything...Want to be in school next few years, but not “X”. Don’t really see school as important. When I’m an adult, I want to have my own family, will do things differently. Take them out. Don’t know what job, just any job, except for those grocery jobs. [**Nate**]

Students’ ideas about what they don’t want to do in the future

Sometimes it was easier for students to tell us what they didn’t want in their future lives, rather than what they did want. Having children was a common theme with the young people, especially at an early age.

I wouldn’t have a baby—it’s not worth it, where’s your money going to come from—its all that responsibility [**Pam**].

I don’t want babies cause I don’t want to be walking past the bros with a pram. I wouldn’t have freedom any more—would have to watch the baby and the missus every day and put food on the table at a young age. [**Jerry**]

Poverty was something these students knew well and they wanted to avoid that if they could.

I don't want to be poor but I don't mind if I am a solo-mum—I can handle it. [**Tweety**]

Doesn't want to be a bum, you don't get much money and have a boring life [**Tom Lee**]

Finally, one student had decided to give up at risk behaviours.

Don't want to be drinking, smoking... I want to be a positive person [**Kitty**].

9. Conclusions

The story underneath the ‘stories’

Ninety-three percent of the AE students we interviewed had not experienced successful learning in their secondary schools and yet 80 percent had found primary schooling to be conducive to successful learning. There is no doubt that many of these students were troubled young people, with home and whānau contexts likely to impede their learning, but it is salutary to hear them describe the ways in which the different sectors supported or failed to support them, regardless of their backgrounds. In their views primary schools in the main had provided enough scaffolding to support their educational progress. They identified a number of factors that had allowed them to learn alongside their peers: a protected environment; one-to-one learning situation; positive relationships with teachers; safe boundaries with consistent routines; caring and nurturing assistance where it was needed; a range of educational interventions; and appropriate learning levels with attainable next learning steps and guided teaching to reach those steps. Secondary schooling, in their eyes appeared to have provided few of these factors.

As a result, almost 100 percent of these students disengaged once they had started secondary school, some for as long as a year before they were picked up and sent to their AE centres. This disengagement preceded their lack of presence in secondary schools (extended truancy) and confirms what the international literature has found i.e. that an engagement gap (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006) occurs before the oft-cited achievement gap.

In spite of this disengagement, all of the students were enjoying AE, and 95 percent were re-engaged in learning. They were experiencing effective relationships with teachers in AE and were working at more appropriate levels for learning to become successful again. Some needed more extended learning than their AE centres were able to provide, and we identify a resourcing problem with AE as it presently stands. From our findings we think it unlikely that many of these students could be successfully reintegrated into secondary schools as they presently are organised and resourced. There appears to be little or no resourcing to assist these students to return to mainstream settings, and very little will or expectation that they are entitled to the regular New Zealand curriculum.

It needs to be remembered that we studied a very small group of students from the entire secondary school sector in this research, but our findings resonate with other research about secondary school students in New Zealand, and the need for serious re-thinking of secondary education. Russell Bishop's Te Kōtahitanga project emphasises the need for better relationships between teachers and Maori students before their achievement levels will rise, and Jane Gilbert's (2005) research argues the need for a change in learning and curriculum to better meet the needs

of the vast majority of secondary students for the 21st Century. Building on this treatise, Bolstad and Gilbert (2008) in a more recent book, argue that present day secondary school assessment needs to be rethought to make these changes possible. All of our projects come to the same conclusion—that secondary education is not meeting the needs of all of today’s secondary school students.

The differences in our findings are the issues we see contributing to this. We argue that there are *two main issues* contributing to why this is the case—relational (teachers not engaging with these students effectively) and organisational (school systems level failures). Bishop’s research argues the former point, while Gilbert and Bolstad’s research argues the latter –organisational issues around assessment are driving the present system. We argue that secondary schools need to be rethought to ensure *initial engagement* for all learners, not just the ones who fit into the system. Gilbert and Bolstad argue that organisational issues (assessment and outcomes) *at the other end of the system* are the problem. Most researchers concur with the proposition that changes need to occur for all students to experience successful school outcomes.

Our study, it needs to be remembered, is a very small sample of one extreme end of the continuum of all secondary school learners, so we cannot make general statements about our findings. However, our findings taken in conjunction with the above studies, bring to light the most dysfunctional aspects of the present system at this end of the continuum—those in the ‘tail’ where there are too many young people who are failing to achieve. We would hazard a guess that there are significant numbers of other secondary students on this continuum whom the system is failing to serve.

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- Alcohol and New Zealand Youth: A snapshot of young people's experience with alcohol
- Violence and New Zealand Young People
- Alternative Education Students Health: From Northland and Auckland Regions

<http://www.youth2000.ac.nz/publications/reports-1142.htm>

Appendix A: Alternative Education Questions

Focus Group (with all the students we will be talking to from each centre)

- Introductions—us and them

- Tell them about the research and what we will be doing in this session

Question:

Tell us a bit about this centre here and what it's like (good and not so good things).

How do you feel about:

- The staff
- The kind of things you do here (learning and other activities)

How is being at this centre different from school?

- Are your needs being met here?
- Are you learning more here? Is the learning more to your style?

Individual Interviews

1. Tell me about how you came to be at an AE centre? What happened?

(Take it from here—back through their life, asking questions which contributed to them being here)

Prompts:

<p><u>A.E.Centre:</u></p> <p>What did you feel when you were told? What did other people think (parents, friends)?</p> <p>How was the decision made, what were you told, and who stood up for you? Was it a good decision from your point of view?</p> <p>Tell us a bit about this centre here and what it's like (good and not so good things).</p> <p>How do you feel about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The staff• The kind of things you do here (learning and other activities) <p>How is being at this centre different from school?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Are your needs being met here?- Are you learning more here? Is the learning more to your style?	<p><u>Check:</u></p> <p><i>Try to get a sense of whether the student takes responsibility for whatever led to the AE enrolment, or whether they think it was all other people's fault.</i></p> <p><i>Family—Were family involved in decision? How supportive were they? How did it impact on them?</i></p> <p><i>Friends: What is the impact on friends? What are friends here like?</i></p> <p><i>Health: Any evidence of lessening of risk behaviours by being here?</i></p>
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2. When did you find that learning was difficult or boring for you? What was...?

Prompts:

Was it at primary, intermediate or secondary—or did it happen when you transitioned from one to another?

How did you feel about that?

Interventions:

- Did anyone help you to do the work better? (*Teacher aides, special one-to-one help, reading recovery, GSE, behaviour, counselling, etc.*)
- What would you have liked people to do that they didn't?

Teachers:

- Can you remember a teacher that you really liked / didn't like? (*Prompt for reasons*)
- What do you remember as the best / worst things about school? (*Which sector?*)

Family:

*Check family situation **and support** then. Check if any awful things happened to older wider family members or friends in the past and how influenced they have been by this—if there has been any ripple effect.*

Health:

Check for any evidence of risk around health behaviours—glue, alcohol, drugs, smoking? What do they think the implications are of this behaviour?

Do they suffer from depression, anxiety, anger problems? Acting out behaviours?

3. Tell me about the friends you have made through school.

- Was it easy to make new friends at each school? (*Check confidence and sociability*)
- Why do you think your friends like you?
- How did your friends feel about school? Did they ever do things at school that got them into trouble, or you into trouble? (*When, what?*)
- What did the teachers do when you got into trouble? What do you think they should do to help kids when they get into trouble?
- What sort of things did you do with friends after school? Did you ever get into trouble with your friends?

(Check peer network, bullying, how supervised were after-school activities?)

4. Tell me about your family

- a. Who is in your family and where are you in the order of children?
- b. How do you get on with your parents, brothers and sisters?
- c. Do you remember what sort of little kid you were—or how do family members describe you when you were little, e.g. happy, shy, talkative, energetic, curious, mischievous, “naughty”, etc?
- d. Did you go to any kind of pre-school?

- e. What sort of things can you remember doing at home when you weren't at preschool—such as playing, watching TV, being read to.
- f. Do your parents work? Have they always?
- g. Do you see a lot of your extended family?
- h. Location: Where have you lived? Urban/rural (*Check stability of family situation*)
- i. Have family members helped in your learning? (*Heard reading, encouraged them, been interested, helped with homework, talked to them about school, gone to parent evenings at school, etc*)
- j. (*If relevant*) What do your parents think about you wagging school?
- k. What do they think about what has happened to you in coming here?

5. What can you tell me about your general health as a kid growing up?

- Can you remember anyone ever telling you about being sick as a young child? (*Colds, ear infections, glue ear, allergies? ADHD?*)
- Can you remember having health checks done at school—ears, eyes, injections, etc.
- Did you go to the doctor often as a child?
- How healthy do you think you are now?
- Have you taken any substances, like smoking, sniffing glue, alcohol? Do you think you might have risked your health by taking these?

6. Strengths:

- What are you good at? How do you know? (Who tells you?)
- What things are you most interested in?
- What do other people see as your strengths? [Have you ever taught anybody these things?]
- Why do your friends like hanging out with you?
- What would you like to be doing more of if you could?

(Check: How do family and friends react to these things? Supportive or not? Check out resilience.)

7. Future Aspirations:

- Who would you like to be like? (*Role models: Who do they look up to—who are their heroes?*)
- What would you like to be doing in the next few years? (Are they even thinking about 5 years ahead, or just next year? Going back to mainstream school?/ Getting further experience for a job?/ Check how positive they are about the future).
- Do you dream about what you would like to be as an adult? (*Leading to adult occupation choices, type of lifestyle they would like in their 20s, etc.*)
- Do you dream about what you would like to be as an adult? *Check location—where do they want to be—here or somewhere else?*)
- Are there things you know you don't want to be doing as an adult? *Check how much control they feel they have over their future.*

Appendix B: Feedback from Challenge Consultative Group

Sarah Calvert and Keren Brooking met with 8 AE students and tutors from Challenge in Johnsonville on 21st May 2008.

Their feedback included:

Introductions: importance of introductions and us telling the students a little about ourselves as well. For them they decided to state their name, where they are from and one thing they like.

Them having control: they pointed out that I need to tell them this right at the beginning, which I had forgotten to until later.

Focus groups / individual interviews—their preference was to talk in a focus group, rather than individually, but they said that might depend on how the group worked together in each place, and that may not be appropriate.

Interactive activity: they decided they would like to try this, so we did, but in pairs. It didn't really work as intended, but that was because the students were a lot more talkative than we had been prepared for, and because we weren't working one-to-one, sitting beside them. However, even with the one person I worked with later up at the house, he didn't really use it. I had to ask him to write his age down. He was quite happy just to talk to me. One student did tag all over his sheet as he talked which kept him busy—which was fine.

I think we could have the activity there if the student was reticent, but it may not be all that necessary. Or else we could use it (write down things they say) and they could add to it.

Questions:- they gave us good feedback on not asking too direct questions as they said that would just close students down. The questions that did this were around family in particular.

One student said he didn't find it easy to answer some questions with a staff member there. We hadn't anticipated staff would sit in on our discussion, and we certainly don't want them being present in the interviews.

- ✓ Read and interpret information presented in tables and graphs
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 8492
Use standard units of measurements
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 5232
Probabilities in practical situations
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 3490
Write an incident report
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 11906
Develop and maintain friendships

Accomplishments

- ✓ NCEA level 2 Unit Standard 62
Maintaining personal presentation in the workplace
- ✓ NCEA level 2 Unit Standard 12354
Implications of independent living
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 10792
Write formal personal correspondence
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 2977
Read texts for practical purposes
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 8808
Read an inclusive range of written texts
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 14236
Explore and develop personal goals that contribute to well-being
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 5223
Use formulae and equations to solve problems
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 8489
Solve problems which require calculation with whole numbers
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 8490
Solve problems which using calculations with numbers expressed in different forms
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 8491
Read and interpret information presented in tables and graphs
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 8492
Use standard units of measurements
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 5232
Probabilities in practical situations
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 3490
Write an incident report
- ✓ NCEA level 1 Unit Standard 11906
Develop and maintain friendships