Stories of educational engagement among young people with complex needs: A snapshot from the Stories of Resourcing and Resourcefulness project

Author:
Blaxland, Megan; Skattebol, J; Thomson, C; Hamilton, M; valentine, K

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Research Team

Jennifer Skattebol
Myra Hamilton
Cathy Thomson
Megan Blaxland
kylie valentine
Deborah Brennan

For further information:
Jen Skattebol j.skattebol@unsw.edu.au

Social Policy Research Centre

UNSW Sydney NSW 2052 Australia
T +61 2 9385 7800
F +61 2 9385 7838
E sprc@unsw.edu.au
W www.sprc.unsw.edu.au

The Social Policy Research Centre is based in the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences at UNSW Sydney.

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Executive Summary

To successfully engage in education, young people need access to a range of material, educational, cultural, relational and psychological resources. What does it take to resource young people in education if they do not receive enough support from home? This snapshot report presents findings on the resourcing and resourcefulness of young people with families in complex circumstances for whom the resources required for education are not readily accessible. Many of these young people experienced adverse events and trauma in their home lives. Their school attendance and engagement had been impacted by poverty, generational unemployment, homelessness or high mobility, and the impact of substance abuse within families or mental illness. Attending school was sometimes a respite from other problems, and was sometimes rewarding but often overwhelming. This report teases out the features of the education system needed to support these young people to be successful in the education system.

The Australian education system is premised on the idea that it provides opportunities for all children to succeed regardless of the resources in their homes. However, OECD comparisons indicate that the Australian system is high quality but low equity –a socio-economically disadvantaged student in Australia is six times more likely to be a 'low performer' than an advantaged student (OECD, 2016). This suggests the aforementioned policy idea is aspirational at best. This report examines young people's experiences with and approaches to education in the current Australian and state-level educational policy context.

A three-year study was conducted by the Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney in partnership with Uniting, NSW Family & Community Services (FACS) and Mission Australia. The study, *Stories of Resourcing and Resourcefulness* explored the ways young people with complex service needs engaged over time with both formal and informal resources. Forty-four young people with complex service needs were interviewed as part of the research. Biographical narrative interviews were used to elicit rich and complex data about the significant events in the young people's lives and how they made sense of these events through a biographical 'story'. The study was longitudinal; the researchers returned a year after the first interviews to learn from young people how their resourcing stories had changed over time.

Of the 44 young people interviewed, 37 told us a lot about school, while the remaining seven young people said very little about school and focussed on other events and activities in their lives. Fourteen participants were attending school when they first engaged in the research. Thirteen had attended some form of alternative schooling including flexi-schooling and specialist classes. Twenty young people had finished their schooling when we met them; of these five had reached the end of year 12 and another five had stayed in school until year 11. Others had left school between years 8 and 10. This report presents data from a thematic analysis alongside three short case studies, which better capture how events and complexities interacted over time.

In general terms, many of the young people discussed their early schooling and learning with enthusiasm. They saw education as an important resource: as one young person put it, 'Education, like I cannot emphasis how important education is.' This meant that young people worked hard to continue in education when their lives outside school were extremely difficult, stressful and even dangerous. School could be an important source of support. For some, school was a form of respite from complex home lives. Nearly all valued social contact with peers at school. Others spoke of access to food, sport and extracurricular activities; supportive adults in teachers, principals and counsellors; and referrals to community support services. However, most found

engagement school hard to sustain which suggests more needs to be offered through the education system.

Most participants described childhoods marked by cascading crises, in which one difficulty led into and built on another. All had experienced financial shortfalls with everyday basic expenses and with school costs. They spent considerable energy managing the complexity of day-to-day living with few resources. Some participants carried significant care responsibilities for other members of their families or friends with disability or mental health issues. For some young people, home was not a safe place and every day they struggled to keep themselves safe physically and emotionally. Schools frequently did not recognise and respond to these struggles. Schools could also be unsafe environments where they were bullied and shamed because of disability or needs arising from poor mental health and ongoing trauma in their lives. They told us it that managing these challenges made it difficult to comply with school norms around attendance and dress codes and they often had challenging behaviours because of the stressors in their lives.

Many had interrupted schooling due to frequent moves with their families, moves between foster families, refuges, couch surfing or living rough. Several of the young people described periods where no schooling was available to them when they were refused entry to schools because of past behaviour. Others struggled to catch up in new local schools when they moved to a new residence. Some of the young people were placed in specialist support classes in their high schools where they had lower student–teacher ratios and training in how to manage their behaviour, but typically these young people felt that these classes did not meet their academic needs. Importantly, while Australian education providers are legally obliged to provide "reasonable accommodations" and appropriate adjustments and support to facilitate access, participation and inclusion, a significant proportion described periods where no schooling was available to them when they were refused entry to schools because of past behaviour.

As noted above, 13 young people in this study attended alternative schools that offered individualised approaches to learning. These schools provided young people with more recognition and support in their lives outside of school and substantially greater flexibility around the timing of their education, both from week to week and through extended timelines for completion. They offered support one-on-one or through small group sessions. Young people had greater flexibility in the subjects they studied and felt that there was more understanding when they made mistakes. As a result, young people typically described alternative schools as respectful environments that provided meaningful learning around goals they could set for themselves. There is uneven quality in this sector, however, and some participants did not feel as though their academic needs were met to the extent that they would like in alternative school environments. The multiple pathways through the education system including vocational training and flexi-schools were not always clear to young people, nor did they always offer satisfying learning experiences.

When high school was no longer an option for young people, either because of their age or because they were too disengaged to continue, community organisations sometimes connected young people to other forms of learning. Experiences with these courses were very mixed. For some, very short courses gave young people an unexpected sense that they could be competent learners. Others moved through a series of courses that did not build their sense of competence or lead to work. These courses only reinforced their understanding that study was not something they wished to pursue. Again, there are quality assurance issues in this educational sector.

Young people indicated that they needed comprehensive, individually sustained and integrated supports.

Our research confirms that it makes a difference when schools recognise, validate and support young people's commitments to education when they show up *even when there are problems with attendance and behaviour*. This needs to be coupled with positive responses to young peoples' commitments to their families that potentially draw them away from attention to their schoolwork at times. Targeted assistance needs to be complemented by quality teaching in positive school cultures where young people can learn in emotionally and physically safe environments.

All schools have access to additional resources to support students in need but the processes required to access these resources are critical. Schools that provide easily accessible confidential ways for students to access additional resources are making a valuable first intervention. Young people need to be in control of how much information they are required to share to access these resources, so their trust is built as they reach out for help. There is a need for greater discretion so that young people do not feel shamed about their home lives and unsafe in their school communities.

Scholarship programs from third parties offer much needed financial supports; however, few are not reliant on the cooperation of adult members of households. Such programs need to be more responsive to young people who are largely independent so they can make use of on-going financial supports for school engagement.

Young people who have experienced hardship sometimes have a fragmented sense of themselves as learners, but they bring many existing competencies to education settings that can be galvanised into positive educational outcomes. Behaviour classes, units and flexi-schools target some young people's learning needs effectively, but do less well at identifying and targeting the range of young people's capabilities in ways that intellectually challenge them. Teachers in these settings need to be able to target the patchwork of foundational knowledge and skills that is common among young people who are highly mobile. Improving the quality of such teachers and the practice of teaching means attracting and retaining a strong professional teaching workforce, guiding them well in the best instructional methods and supporting them to carry out their responsibilities through quality frameworks.

Young people often feel like they are navigating the complex systems of schools on their own when they are highly mobile or have experienced school exclusions. The families of young people who face complex challenges are often not well equipped to act as effective advocates for their children and some young people do not have any family support. There is a need for brokers or case workers who can navigate enrolment requirements for young people and/or their families, and for better information sharing and pedagogical flows between schools when young people move.

Employment agencies have a role in guiding young people who have been failed by school systems to high quality courses where they can meet their learning potentials. With the right supports, these young people may well be able to build trajectories that lift them out of the insecure futures that are associated with having a lack of intergenerationally transferred assets and securities. Third party brokers have an important part to play in connecting schools to other agencies that can offer wrap around supports. Government supported learning pathways need to stay the distance with young people and recognise that learning for employment purposes may need to come after basic needs are met.

1 Introduction

The resources young people can access (material, educational, cultural, relational and psychological) affect their capacity to participate successfully in education. Most receive these resources as a matter of course from schools, families and friends. We know that the more resources that parents have the better able they are to provide the resources to their children that promote health, social-emotional well-being and cognitive development (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Bradley & Corwyn 2002, cited in Hancock et al., 2018). Educational outcomes are influenced by a complex range of interlocking personal, family, institutional, community and societal factors. These factors include: the economic and educational resources available in a family; young people's academic and non-cognitive skills; knowledge and attitudes to learning; parents' engagement in their children's learning; the quality of teaching that young people experience; school culture; and the resources and networks that support young people's broader knowledge of educational institutions and opportunities.

Life events such as family illness and death, residential moves and job changes are experienced in all families. However, economic and social resources buffer families from the adverse effects of these events. In situations where families have few resources life events can cascade out of control (Baxter et al., 2012). This leaves young people more and more poorly resourced and they can then find it difficult to secure the resources that are assumed to be universally available, including school education.

This snapshot report examines the biographical narratives of young people with complex resourcing needs to consider how they have experienced and approached education alongside other imperatives in their lives. The interviews were conducted as part of *Stories of Resourcing and Resourcefulness*, a major three-year study conducted by the Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney in partnership with Uniting, NSW Family & Community Services (FACS) and Mission Australia for an Australian Research Council Linkage project. Research into young people's needs are often related to evaluations of the programs or initiatives in particular policy silos. Our biographical approach captures the young people's perspectives from the vantage point of their own lives and needs as they define it. The study explores the ways that young people with complex needs engaged the full range of services over time and how these engagements interacted with both formal and informal resources.

The analysis presented here relates to primary school, high school and post-school education. There is a strong focus on high school because that was the focal point many of the research participants emphasised in their own biographies. These self-directed, self-authored reports told of complex social ecologies impacting on engagement with school which in turn impacted on those social ecologies. We can see multiple challenges building into cascading crises, some of which were driven by the activity of schools and some of which were ameliorated by school's efforts and activity. While some young people talked about ways that schools exacerbated the pressures in their lives, they also gave clear examples of what made participating in education possible and a positive experience.

This report shares these insights and is organised as follows. We begin with an overview of what is known about educational disadvantage in Australia in general terms and the main elements of educational policy designed to support young people. We follow this with a detailed account of our methodology. We then present findings beginning with accounts from young people about the adversities they faced in their trajectories through education systems. We track the challenging life

events they experienced, the resources they are able to use and the strategies they use to secure resources as they transition through and out of school. The report concludes by drawing the findings together and examining the implications for policy.

Educational disadvantage in Australia

The Australian education system is premised on the idea that young people's educational and employment achievements are a consequence of their efforts and abilities and that the system provides opportunities for all children to succeed regardless of the resources in their homes. The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) states that Australian governments will "provide all students with access to high-quality schooling that is free from discrimination based on gender, language, sexual orientation, pregnancy, culture, ethnicity, religion, health or disability, socioeconomic background or geographic location" However, OECD comparisons indicate that the Australian system is high quality but low equity – this means that a socio-economically disadvantaged student in Australia was six times more likely to be a low performer than an advantaged student (OECD, 2016).

The extent of disadvantage in young people's homes is significant: 17 per cent of young Australians live below the poverty line (Davidson et al., 2018). Up to 20 per cent of young people experience mental illness (Sanson et al. 2011), and significant minorities experience drug and alcohol dependence (AIHW, 2011), are homeless (Chamberlain et al. 2013) or are under juvenile justice supervision (AIHW 2010-11). A significant number of Australian young people provide significant on-going help to family members with a disability or long-term illness (Cass et al., 2011). Often, multiple challenges are concentrated among the same young people (Scutella et al., 2013; Mendes et al., 2014; Redmond & Skattebol, 2017). Indigenous young people, for example, are more likely to experience poverty, adversity, intergenerational system failures and systemic racism. These adversities and forms of violence lead to higher rates of suicide among Aboriginal young people compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts and higher rates of contact with the juvenile justice system (Tilbury 2009; AIHW 2010-2011).

Life events such as having an illness or injury occur to a close relative, having a close friend or other relative die, suffering a serious personal injury or illness, and changing residence typically occur in most Australian families but are more frequent for disadvantaged young people (Baxter et al., 2012). The frequency and amount of resource buffers available to families has a significant effect on the association between life events and subsequent wellbeing (Baxter et al., 2012; Redmond & Skattebol, 2014). 'Adverse childhood events' (ACEs) is a phrase used to describe episodes of family violence, mental illness, substance abuse as well as low socio-economic status, peer victimisation, peer isolation and rejection, and exposure to community violence (Finkelhor et al., 2015). The frequency and intensity of these events predicts long term health and education outcomes. Such events can cascade to further strip families and communities of wellbeing. Frequent adverse life events make it extremely challenging for young people to attend and engage fully with learning at school.

Schooling places financial stress on families in high poverty contexts. In public schools, many subjects and activities attract fees (Saunders & Bedford 2018). There is evidence to show that many students choose schools where they know their parents can afford the costs of subjects even where these schools are reputed to be of poor quality (Skattebol et al., 2012). The rhetoric of learner and school choice dominates education policy and practice. Young people are encouraged to take responsibility for school decisions and outcomes and to be strategic about their educational pathways. However, as many have argued, most young people speak the language of individual

choice and control, but only some have the requisite economic and cultural capital to make real choices (Butler & Muir, 2017; Cuervo and Wyn, 2016).

In 2014, The Smith Family estimated 'the real costs' of attending public schools —from uniforms, shoes and stationery through to the charges that are part of daily attendance and study — at upwards of $2000 for a primary school child over a year. While there are discretionary funds available in public schools these are often over-subscribed and young people choose to opt out rather than create an imperative where their family has to declare their financial situation (Skattebol et al., 2012; Skattebol & Hayes, 2015). Importantly, cost is often a prohibitive factor in young people's technology use. Disparities in access to internet or mobile phone-based technologies are related to poverty and have detrimental and sometimes disastrous effects in the educational lives of children and young people (Burns, 2017).

Care responsibilities at home can also have an impact on school engagement. There are a significant number of young Australians in families where there is chronic illness, mental health problems, disability, alcohol or substance misuse — again correlated positively with low socioeconomic status. These young people will be providing regular and significant care, either episodically or over many years, often 'hidden' to schools, teachers and other professionals (Cass et al., 2011).

Experience of violence also impacts on school engagement. Children can experience violence in their homes, neighbourhoods and schools. Boys who are bullied are nearly three times more likely to be absent from school and girls who have experienced sexual violence have a three-fold increased risk of being absent. Those who have experienced any form of violence in childhood have a 13 per cent increased probability of not graduating from school (Fry et al., 2018). These long- term outcomes are linked to absenteeism. Absenteeism affects the educational outcomes of all students, not just those in schools in ares of low socioeconomic status (Hancock et al., 2017).

However, absenteeism itself is more prevalent in families under stress. Families experiencing economic adversities are at high risk of forced residential moves which in turn increases the risk of unplanned school moves for children and educational underperformance (Fantuzzo et al., 2013). Disruption to learning occurs as children have to develop new peer and teacher relationships and adjust to different school climates (Dauter & Fuller et al., 2016). When these moves are unplanned, they are more likely to occur in term time when children are less likely to be orientated to the new curriculum, school norms and rules. For these reasons, school mobility is correlated with low reading and mathematics proficiency, grade retention and an increased risk of leaving school early (Fantuzzo et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2001; Rumberger and Larson, 1998). Teachers are less likely to invest as much effort into the learning of transient children, and these children are less likely to receive specialised assistance, are more likely to repeat a grade, and have the added social stress of adapting to new peers, teachers, learning content and school environments (Rumberger and Larson, 1998; Skattebol et al., 2012). Frequent school moves disrupt children's relationships with peers and this can lead to difficulty fitting in at school. This sense of being an outsider socially often compounds with entering the school syllabus at different points and not being able to transfer knowledge gained in one context to another. These disruptions may have profound effects on young people's sense of themselves as successful learners or in their confidence that school is for them.

The way schools respond to the shortage of resources in young people's lives is critically important. Young people without the material and social resources to fit in at school find schools challenging places to be; these students can also be challenging for schools (Skattebol & Hayes,

2015). They frequently come with a constellation of non-conforming behaviours. Schools responses can be either be disciplinary, management–focussed and exclusionary, or persevering, inclusive and focused on making connections. The latter approach is far from business as usual in many mainstream schools.

The school system is becoming increasingly less accessible to students with complex needs and behaviour problems. A recent study that found that over 12% of students with disability had been refused entry into a school in the last 12 months – many of these young people had complex needs (CYDA, 2019). Some researchers argue that educational policy and its interpretations are becoming more exclusionary. McGregor et al. (2015) note that in recent years there has been a relaxation of the rules that govern suspension and expulsion across Australian states. They contend that principals have greater latitude than ever to exclude young people for breaches that have little impact on school safety. School policy is typically worded in ways that offer little guidance between competing imperatives to provide orderly learning environments and to accommodate young people with complex needs. In New South Wales (NSW), policy states that students may be excluded for 'repeated refusal to follow the school discipline code' (NSW Department of Education and Communities Public Schools 2011:9). This sits alongside other policy which states 'that students cannot be suspended for not wearing a uniform (NSW Suspension of Expulsion of School Students – Procedures 2015. [1]

Young people with complex family circumstances are typically struggling to meet the rules and codes of schools. Competing policy statements do little to ensure educational justice for young people who are not meeting rules because of resource shortages and compounding disadvantages. Inconsistencies in policy offer little support for principals to stay the distance with young people with challenging behaviours in school contexts under pressure to deliver high educational outcomes. However, the negative effects of exclusion and suspension on young people are significant. They often find it very difficult to find their way back into the system and to re-engage with education.

Furthermore, young people in their secondary years of schooling are more likely to assert their opinions and needs in respect of what to learn and how to learn it (Down et al., 2018). This interest in asserting capability and independence may well be even stronger for young people who are living independently, with complex challenges or caring for family members. Connecting with young people in the later years of school often requires teachers to take a more holistic and dialogic approach to teaching and learning. As their sense of what works for them grows, young people who do not feel like they 'fit' in school are likely to have high levels of conflict with teachers. Furthermore, it is only when schools provide meaningful curriculum that these students find it possible to engage or re-engage with school. McGregor et al.(2015) argue that a meaningful curriculum is characterised by addressing out-of-school needs, a valuing of difference within each setting and a willingness to listen to students' views on a range of matters.

Saunders and Munford's (2016) landmark longitudinal study of vulnerable youth found that a sense of belonging at school was central to an understanding of resilience for this group. They argue that it is vital we understand schools as spaces that not only deliver qualifications but also numerous developmental opportunities (such as sports, cultural and other endeavours as well as practice in building relationships with peers and adults). Their study found that young people with complex needs trying to remain at school were engaged in a number of practices —trying to fit in, searching for narrative coherence, authoring an alternative self-story and fostering a sense of belonging.

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[1] https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/associated-documents/suspol_07.pdf

When schools offered time imbued with emotional and attitudinal resources such as perseverance, adaptability, relationships and honesty, young people were able to meet their teachers and engage in effective learning. These institutional attributes may be present in any school because of teachers and other school personnel who bring this approach into their daily practices.

While it may be challenging, schools can align their service offerings with the needs of young people in disadvantage. A sense of welcome and belonging at school is a strong predictor of academic achievement and can mediate the effects of other predictors such as socioeconomic status and parental educational achievement (Reynolds et al., 2017). The notion of belonging refers to a feeling that is generated when schools prioritise the efforts made by young people to remain connected to people, places and the issues that matter to them. While well-developed elsewhere, this concept is often poorly conceptualised in the education field. Yuval-Davis (2006) offers a notion of belonging that involves webs of relationships and emphasizes *attachments* and *actions*. Yuval-Davis identifies three types of attachments: those associated with social locations; identifications and emotional attachments; and ethical and political values. This explicit definition can be operationalised to better understand young people's efforts, behaviours and actions through an understanding of their attachments (Hayes & Skattebol, 2014).

Programs to address students' vulnerability may be either *preventative* (i.e., operating as part of an early intervention strategy [or *ameliorative* (i.e., remedial and the most common approach by schools). Ameliorative approaches that attempt to redress problems as they arise are more common than preventative approaches that deliver extra resources early and are also of highly variable quality (Zyngier et al., 2016).

Most existing research on the engagements of young people with complex needs with schooling have been focussed at a single point-in-time, or from a within school perspective. There is limited research on the complex social ecologies in which young people with complex service needs understand, seek and interact with multiple resource and service systems over time. This requires an understanding of the terms in which young people with complex needs understand, approach, and use formal resources like schools and how they combine this with informal resources in the context of changing circumstances, biographical trajectories and life events over time.

2 The policy context

All young people should have access to high quality education. This is a commitment made by Australian governments in 2008 in the Melbourne Declaration (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. The first goal in the Declaration is 'Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence'. The measures designed to achieve this goal include a commitment by Governments and school sectors to:

- Provide all students with access to high-quality schooling that is free from discrimination

- Ensure that socioeconomic disadvantage ceases to be a significant determinant of educational outcomes

- Reduce the effects of other sources of disadvantage.

Over the last few decades, service provision for young people has grown within the health and education sectors. There is now greater investment in youth-specific services that target mental health and homelessness and an increase in services that work with young people to consolidate support through family, friends and community. However, there continues to be a need for better approaches to the needs of these young people in the education system.

Efforts to increase the numbers of young Australians who complete school have been broadly successful but still fall short of effectively addressing the needs of the most vulnerable students. The Compact for Young Australians announced by COAG in 2009 is a central plank of these efforts. The compact and state initiatives had substantial effects on high school completion rates across the nation (Lamb, 2011; COAG, 2014). Between 2008 and 2012 the apparent retention rate from years 7/8 to year 12 for all Australian schools rose from 74.6 to 79.9 per cent; by 2018 this rate had risen to 84.5 per cent. However, this still leaves a significant minority of young Australians who do not complete school. The Compact imposed sanctions on income support for families with dependents not in education, training or work, and stipulated that students who were not in education or working 25 hours per week would be ineligible for youth allowance.

Finally, at the federal level, the government invested in schools in low socioeconomic areas through a national partnership agreement. The Australian Government promised $1.5 billion over seven years (2008/09 to 2014/15) to approximately 1700 schools in low socioeconomic locations around the country.[2] This agreement (now expired) aimed to improve scores in the National Assessment Plan —Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). While targeting communities with low socioeconomic status, the initiative has been widely critiqued because of its key reliance on standardised testing to evaluate school performance. Schools' eligibility for the program was based on having low rankings in the Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage that takes into account both school and home demographic factors and NAPLAN scores. This demonstrates the centrality and high-stakes nature of NAPLAN when tied to school funding and performance management in schools, despite the many criticisms of the efficacy of such standardised tests as the key measure of school performance (See Lingard et al., 2015). The National Partnership Agreement directed its significant resources to communities where disadvantage is most concentrated; but this is only around 20 per cent of disadvantaged Australians. In their Review of Funding for Schooling, Gonski et al. (2011) urged school systems to better recognise that meeting

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[2] http://smarterschools.gov.au/low-socio-economic-status-school-communities

the needs of vulnerable young people requires significant investment, including greater staffing resources and facilities and a higher level of leadership and support. This still needs to be realised in policy and practice.

The current National School Reform Agreement (2019) sets a Schooling Resource Standard (SRS). The SRS is made up of a base funding amount for every student plus six additional loadings that provide extra funding to meet the needs of all students. Unfortunately, the National School Reform Agreement is less robust than previous COAG agreements (such as The National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions) in emphasising community partnerships that can support young people and their families and young people on their own to navigate between resource systems so they have what they need. However, the Education Council has recently commissioned a review of senior secondary pathways to examine how students can be supported to choose the best pathway into work, further education or training. The review will provide advice and recommendations to the Education Council on the skills and knowledge young people need to thrive beyond school.

National polices and priorities have been supported by the implementation of relevant curriculum and student support measures in all jurisdictions. Curriculum offerings were diversified through Vocational, Educational and Training (VET) pathways and Content Endorsed courses for students who were not seeking entry into higher education through an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR).

In NSW, where our study participants lived, young people under 17 are able to:

- transfer to TAFE for a year 10 equivalent program if it is deemed to be in their best interests by their caregivers, their school and the local TAFE

- take up an apprenticeship or traineeship if their principal agrees to a Certificate of Exemption from Enrolment.

Young people over 17 are able to:

- leave school for full time work; they may need to provide a letter from their employer.

For those who stay at school, there are more than 3,000 support classes (for young people with disability and additional learning and support needs) in regular schools and 113 Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs) which support more than 22,200 students. Learning Choices Programs[3] have been able to get recognition as special assistance schools. The NSW Board of Studies added the option for schools to register as a "Board Endorsed Alternative Education Program". This provision has enabled a minority of young people to meet the new completion and participation requirements through an alternative program. In addition to these offerings, the Links to Learning[4] program provides fixed-term grants to non-government community organisations to work with young people aged 12–24 who have left or are at risk of leaving school. These grants target young people transitioning from year 6–7 and young people in years 7–11.

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[3] https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/disability-learning-and-support/secondary/educational-options
[4] https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/eas/youth/

In addition, in NSW, the School-Link Memorandum of Understanding[5] provides a framework for a collaborative approach by the Department of Education and Training and NSW Health to improve the mental health of students.

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[5] https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/counselling-and-psychology-services/media/documents/school-link-mou.pdf

3 The study

Method

Biographical methods foreground the meaning young people make of their own lives and background researcher-defined problems and the parameters of existing service provision models (Henderson et al., 2007). They permit close understandings of how formal and informal resourcing systems interact. The way stories are told allow us to understand the life events that are significant to participants and how sense is made of those events to shape the individual's approach to subsequent events (Wengraf, 2001). Importantly, biographical methods offer a long view on resource shortages; they capture the compounding and confounding effects of poverty, the many stressors that impact on the daily lives of young people, as well as the ways they attempt to access new resources. We are able to look at formal resources across policy silos and how these resources interact with informal resources.

The Stories of Resourcing and Resourcefulness research team conducted biographical narrative interviews with 44 young people aged between 12 and 26 years. There were two waves of data collection approximately one year apart. The interviews were conducted in six geographical areas in NSW (see Table 1).

Table 1 Participants by area in Wave 1

Locations	No.
Inner metropolitan	10
2 x Outer metropolitan	13
Coastal regional centre	7
Rural-regional centres (2 sites)	6
Coastal town	8
Total	**44**

At the first interview in Wave 1, participants were asked to tell us about the times they had needed support, how they had gone about accessing support, and what had happened. One week later, researchers interviewed the participants again, this time a shorter, more structured interview to fill gaps and ask more details about service use.

Wave 2 interviews were conducted around 12–18 months later. In these interviews, the young people discussed their lives in the way they wished. The interviews used biographical narratives which allowed young people to tell their stories in their own way with minimal interruption by the researchers. Researchers invited young people to tell us their life stories (if needed they were prompted to share, 'a story from when times were tough…')

At times the young people recounted traumatic events in their lives. This research design built in safety mechanisms to support young people in several ways. Firstly, by deciding themselves how to narrate their stories, young people could venture into traumatic stories as much or as little as they wished and tell those stories on their own terms. Secondly, all researchers were trained in trauma-informed interviewing techniques that allowed them to support young people through the safe telling of their stories. The researchers' approach was adapted to the particular needs of the young people, but included: reflecting back the young people's story with a positive framing, for

example, reinforcing the strategies young people used to keep themselves safe; and using techniques to manage participants' trauma that arose in retellings, such as taking a break and bringing the young person back to the present. This included a closure process at the end of the interview to leave young people in the present and with a sense of authority over their own story. Researchers then consulted with young people about elements of the research, seeking their feedback and advice on the research process, including the interview, project webpage and approaches to providing findings to policy makers. This positioned then as experts in the research process itself and was valuable for them as well as the research team.

The analysis in this report is presented in three formats. Firstly, we present a brief demographic overview of the young people in the sample and their educational engagement. Secondly is a thematic analysis of young people's educational narratives across the whole sample. The third format for presenting the findings is through case study stories in which narratives that touch on many of the key thematic points of analysis are presented in detail. We offer these selected case studies because the methods allowed us to capture interactions between life events and these are best related through a summary of the stories young people told about themselves.

Confidentiality has been provided to participants through the use of pseudonyms. Identifying details in the stories have been changed to help protect the anonymity of the research participants. Changing details has sometimes not been enough to assure confidentiality, so we have sometimes merged elements of young people's stories and at other times separated elements to make two stories. With these changes we have been careful to maintain the key points being made in the interviews.

The young people in this study

The young people in this study spanned a continuum of service use: some were still connected with their families and some were not, some were engaged mainly in universal services (such as mainstream school and health services) with some secondary service use (including mental health services, youth services or early intervention programs), whereas others had for some time been engaged with tertiary services such as juvenile justice, intensive drug and alcohol rehabilitation, and out-of-home care.

There were 44 participants in Wave 1 biographical narrative interviews and then two-thirds (26/44) returned for a follow-up interview a week later. At the follow-up interviews, the research team sought clarification regarding the young person's story where needed. They also checked in with the young person about the interview experience and provided 'warm referrals' to support services if needed. A warm referral is a facilitated and supported referral process that takes place in dialogue with both the young person and the service. Twenty-one participants returned for a Wave 2 interview 12 months later.

When we first interviewed them, the young people were aged between 13 and 26 years. The average age was 19 years. Twenty-four were young women and 19 were young men. Four of the young people said they identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (GLBT). Thirty-four of the participants were born in Australia and of these 10 told us they were Aboriginal.

Overview of educational engagement

Fourteen of the young people were attending school when we first met them. All had gone to school at some time, but only 37 participants described their schooling in any detail. Of those, 24 told us that they participated in mainstream schooling and 13 said they had attended some form of alternative schooling including flexi-schooling and specialist classes.

Twenty of the young people gave information about their highest level of schooling. Five had finished their schooling at the end of year 12 (see Table 1). Another five had reached year 11. Others had stopped attending school in years 8, 9 or 10. A number of the young people told us that schooling started to be difficult in primary school, and many others found the transition to high school marked the beginning of significant schooling challenges.

Table 2: Participants' finishing year of school

School year	N
Year 12	5
Year 11	5
Year 10	4
Year 9	3
Year 8	3
Total	**20**

Many of the young people were engaged in post-secondary education or had plans to do so. Five were attending or had completed TAFE courses and three others hoped to enrol in TAFE in the near future (see Table 2). One was studying at university and another three young people had plans to do so.

Table 2: Post-secondary education

School year	N
TAFE courses	5
Other short courses (first aid, RSA, driving training)	3
University	1
Plans to enrol in TAFE	3
Plans to attend university	3

4 Findings

Schools are uniquely placed in the worlds of young people. They are a storehouse of resources where most young people learn many valuable work and life skills and have opportunities to connect with people beyond their immediate and extended families. They can offer safe spaces for young people where they can congregate with others who understand them. They are a point of contact with civil society outside of the parameters of the family world. They are a critical conduit to resources for young people who experience adverse childhood events.

Most of the young people in the study expressed enthusiasm for learning in their early days of school. Kiwi said that he loved primary school. His highlights were that he always knew what was coming next and could get the food he needed. Participants saw education as an important resource in spite of the challenges they faced with the educational system. They saw it as a way out of the circumstances they had grown up in. The adversities in their lives beyond school were often quite significant as told by Five Minutes of Fame (see Story 1):

> I ran away from my parents' home and I was sleeping in an abandoned house…and I was trying to go to school without the school thinking anything. (Five Minutes of Fame)

This young man had such a strong commitment to his education that he had experienced almost every educational option available to him. Nick reflected the views of many of the young people when he said:

> I guess education, like I cannot emphasis how important education is. (Nick)

Beliefs about the importance of education are part of the warp and weft of student life; they are fundamental to a successful learner narrative. Successful interactions with school personnel can weave a strong narrative about the student's capability with learning. However, for our participants successful interactions with school were frequently frayed because schools assumed their basic needs were met elsewhere. Young people often persevered with their education in spite of the schools' failures to respond to their needs and provide them with the resources they needed including referrals to other agencies.

Connections with school are in part facilitated by a regulatory apparatus designed to keep young people in school, but perseverance to stay at school was often evident when that apparatus failed. Schools often fell short of providing adequate early intervention and protection (Zygnier et al., 2016). Young people's stories show how little most of their teachers knew about their situations. Typically, there was poor communication between home and school — from both sides of the relationship. It was 'second nature' for young people to contain their home life so they would fit in with other students. Young people are often resistant to applying for targeted resources as they are vulnerable to stigma and assumptions that people carry about families in hardship (Hayes and Skattebol, 2014).

However, some school personnel sought to disrupt a 'leave it at the gate mentality' and engender confidence that support was safely available at school. Often a principal, teacher or teacher's aide became a trusted person and kept the child connected to the idea of school as a place for them. Experiences of teachers and school systems are imbricated in young people's lives. Solid early experiences can keep a child coming, just as one experience open criticism of family poverty can cause a child to retreat from sharing personal information (this is discussed in detail in the section below on 'respectful and supportive adults at school').

Effective teacher student interactions are built from trust, but establishing trust with young people who face many adversities requires teachers to know about poverty and about neglect and abuse. Adverse events can compound in people's lives, sometimes across generations and through communities. Knowledge about where students 'are at' is a necessary foundation for developing relationships and for delivering educational and wellbeing resources. The next section, drawn from young people's narratives, provides a detailed account of the types of adverse events faced by young people in the study.

School engagement when times are tough

This section describes how young people navigated the complex social ecology of school and home to meet their basic needs for safety, food and connection. All lived through times when the money was low and spent time and energy managing day-to-day living with very few resources. For some, home was not a safe environment and their time out of school was spent managing their bodily and emotional safety and integrity. A significant number were called on by family members to provide care for family members. These stressors were often accompanied by moves between households or by households moving frequently.

Economic shortages and responsibilities

Our participants faced challenges in accessing basic resources including sufficient food, a safe home, study space and reliable transport. Some young people talked about needing to be quick with getting food or it would be all gone, or their family running out of money and having to manage several days without food. Those who had access to breakfast clubs noted how important it had been to know there was a meal on the horizon. In his story, Kiwi told us he would often have had no food (Story 1) and described escalating pressures in his family that led to black market engagements (drug markets) and eventually tore his family apart.

Story 1: Kiwi

I wanted to stick with school and move away and get a good job but then it was too hard, me mum left, me dad was heartbroken, he moved and then started selling drugs.

I loved primary school, I went to school every day. Just everything about it. You didn't have to sit on your own all day, I met all my mates that help me out now. I looked forward to the bus ride to school … staring out watching the world go. I like to just go with the flow. Home was really busy, if I timed it wrong I'd get stuck with kids… so I'd always be ready for the bus. It was a patch of quiet in the day.

I liked the feeling of being carried along on a river of people — all busy and going where they were supposed to. Maths was hard but kind of like magic when you knew how to work it out. Only one answer and always the same… you either got it or you were wrong. I knew my friends of ten[6]. I dont want to get ripped off at the shop.

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[6] Pairs of numbers which add to ten.

> *Excursions were fun, especially when we went to the river bank or caught a bus to the local goal… that was awesome. The thing about school was you know what was happening next… all those permission notes, preparation lessons, speeches about how to behave, "reflection" afterwards. I filled those in meself — those permission notes.*
>
> *Amy at the canteen was good, she'd let me chose and then make me work out how much… then I'd say "just put it on the tab!"*
>
> Kiwi never felt like he could get a footing when he went to high school.
>
> *Everything was too hard.*
>
> *Too many kids I didn't know, they teased me for being fat… I don't know…always in trouble for uniform and attendance. I'd never done my work and it took half the class just to get on the right page. The teachers were mean…They'd show me up in front of the class and ask me to stay behind and "talk". They always wanted to talk about "home". I'd sit in the "comfortable" chair and count my words so I said the least number of words ever. All that "do-gooding"… best to just stay quiet.*

A small number of participants did not have the most basic of resources like Kiwi. For others, food needs were met but more expensive items like computers, internet access, apps and websites where you paid to access learning tools were particularly important but difficult to secure.

> *I have to re-sit my course due to the fact that I didn't have a computer and couldn't do all my assignments. (Tagan)*
>
> *I'm independently learning French…It's on an app. I have it on my phone and you can pick whatever language you want…It does need Wi-Fi for it, which sucks. (Rose)*
>
> *There was this one website which I found really helpful…and I was talking to my Physics teacher about it and he's like, "We can't spend the school budget on that." This is helping me so much. It was such a good website. They had videos and they explained everything quite well. (Alice)*

Young people who cannot access economic resources at home often struggle with access to digital tools (Burns, 2017). Not having access to electronic resources affects students' ability to complete their work, but, as Aaron explained, limited access to educational resources also affects students' sense of being fully included at school and socially.

> *I feel left out because I see my mates getting heaps of stuff but I don't get as much as them…it gets me left out. I don't have Wi-Fi. I have to borrow a computer from school to use. (Aaron)*

Tagan explained that it was not usually just one thing she was dealing with:

> *If I had a laptop, if I had my internet working, if I didn't have so many stressors, if I didn't take so many days off due to family problems or I had my wisdom teeth pulled out… (Tagan)*

Tagan felt that school would have been easier with more support to deal with these challenges that were related to home rather than her scholastic abilities.

Rachael was incredibly proud that she had graduated from high school despite very limited access to resources:

> Then the (Higher School Certificate) trials happened. So my half yearly exams for Year 12 and I passed them. I did the first three months of that year or first term of that year with one schoolbook for five subjects. (Rachael)

It is not only income that presented a barrier to learning and engaging at school. Alice (see Story 3) had no quiet space to study, but she could not afford to catch public transport to study in town. She thought she could walk the long distance, but did not feel it was safe to walk so far at night.

Facing some similar and compounded challenges, Tatiana was also unable to study in her family home. When she moved into a small refuge, the opportunity to study increased enormously.

> I had my own room, I had a desk, there was a bed, there was a chair. It was good, it was only a house of five residents. [The workers] helped me a fair bit. They were really supportive and really caring too.

Of course, when such basic resources are difficult to secure, the additional resources that students might need to fully engage in school were also elusive. The top up investments needed to make learning engagement possible were often quite small compared to the costs of remedial interventions required to re-engage students. Access to extra-curricular courses could make a big difference in how young people felt about courses and learning. Annie, for example, spent most of her teenage years in out-of-home care, and greatly appreciated resources to pay for study through the Department:

> They were great in certain aspects, like if I went to a drama course, they paid for my drama course and that sort of stuff. (Annie)

While, the interaction between inadequate resources in a young person's home and engagement in learning was clear to the young people themselves it was not well understood by teachers. Many young people felt school behaviour codes did not reflect an understanding of the pressures in their lives. Attendance deadlines and uniform codes were typically imposed on all students, with teachers making no attempt to find out why students might be struggling with rules. Rose noted that her teachers did not recognise the necessity of combining work and school:

> I even had teachers who would like say, as soon as you reach Year 11 you're better off just quitting your job. That to me was just like, what if that's your only income?

When teachers offer these generic suggestions about how students might manage school pressures, they reinforce the idea 'school is not for me' to those students whose lives do not fit the norms of what is provided to them by family.

Combining study with work or other means to secure basic needs is a real challenge for young people. Youth wages are set at levels that assume young people have their basic needs met. Sam described her job as 'not a very well paid'. But despite the low pay, Sam was highly motivated and told us:

> I have to work at night…I get very little sleep. [Laughs] Not that I mind...I usually go in every day after school.

> It's all a blur. It's just this big blur…if you come to school and you're a little bit tired - you're not ready. You can't do it. That's just how it works at our school at least. […Assignments]

come at you weekly. You've got — they give you prac tests at the end of every fortnight. Just to get you prepared for the HSC. Because it's a blur…I'm just like, 'I'll learn it tomorrow,' when I'm not tired. (Sam)

As Sam argued, finding sufficient energy and focus to learn at school, TAFE or university was difficult for most young people who have money shortfalls at home.

Finding safety

The issues of safety and bodily integrity were common in young people's biographies. Violence at home or in their home communities was often sustained often over long periods of time. One person told us he continued to attend school through the many years during which he experienced violence at his father's house. Another described attending school the day after she was sexually assaulted:

I went to school…I'd gotten there halfway through the class so my teacher was very upset with me. She's like, "You don't look well. Like you've been drinking."…Then as everybody starts to like walk out, I put my head down on the table like that. She walks over, "Don't you put your head down on the table in my class." Everybody ends up walking out and she sits down next to me [and asks] "What is it? What is it about the school work? You shouldn't be like this because school is not this hard." I was like "Miss, you don't understand. I don't know like how to explain."

Violence disrupted young people's capacity to both attend and learn at school. Most were reeling from traumatic events, tired, unable to concentrate and often felt highly alienated from peers. Young people living in cycles of violence often had interrupted school attendance.

Arkanese's story follows as Case Study 2. She told us about very interrupted schooling that stemmed from repeated moves to escape violence. These interruptions meant that Arkanese was always out of step with curriculum and she eventually sought out friends who were jigging classes and truanting because she felt a stronger sense of belonging with young people who were disenfranchised at school.

Story 2: Arkanese

We first met Arkanese at a youth service where she was doing community service hours to pay off thousands of dollars of fines for riding buses without a ticket. She and her girlfriend enthusiastically participated in an interview to discuss the importance of gay marriage in their lives. This enthusiasm for civic engagement was at odds with Arkanese's engagement at school where everything about her life felt out of step:

I was a mouse running through a maze in the school, when I was supposed to be a fish in the fish tank more. I was more - didn't want to sit down for this long - I'd rather just run amok than stay and just sit and listen. I really only just wanted to get up.

Apparently - when I was younger, they reckoned I had ADHD and some behavioural thing…Yeah, but the tablets, I had to have them before school … they would knock me in like five minutes, so then I wouldn't like waking up for school because I'd be tired from it, so I'd get very grumpy.

The mainstream school — like proper school — the work was too hard. That's why I misbehaved. It was too hard for me…Reading, writing is easy. Just like - just history and all that…I was good at maths, but, oh, times this by this and divide it and take away and all that. That's hard. Normally [I ran with] the ratbags, the ones that the teachers would be like "Oh, they're in my class today, gosh, I need 10 coffees"…

Otherwise if I was a nerd and I said I was gay, then I was most likely to be picked on, because they think that oh yeah, you're a nerd so you're easier to target…

I used to be the bully. Sometimes… Just guys that got on my nose…they wouldn't give another kid the ball. It's supposed to be a team and they're just hogging the ball. So I'd tell them. Or I'd go take the ball off them, or something. [I was] like just breaking into a school. Just because [I was] just bored. And didn't want to listen to mum…Yeah. Too hyper.

My life's a bit of a chandelier. When I was in primary school, my brother said something to my mum's ex-boyfriend and he chucked the hot soup at her, but it didn't get her, and he chucked our cats in.

I moved away to get out the area, with mum and my mum's friend, because mum couldn't find a house, they were waiting to get a house. I was staying with my auntie, and then me and mum, we waited for our public house.

Instead of a refuge we stayed in temporary housing for about six months at a time, and we stayed in a hotel for about 20 days, but we went to two temporary houses and a hotel.

Meet the wrong crowd, and then bam. From that day it was like - jigging, smoking, being in the class and bringing alcohol and being suspended constantly, then getting expelled and then going to a behaviour school, because I wouldn't be accepted in another high school.

Behavioural school? It was all right. Because they picked me up and took me home. Yeah, because mum told them our situation. They said, if we move to another temporary house, "just tell them and as long as it's not in like, woop woop" then they'll come and pick me up and take me to school. So I had a driver that would come and pick me up and some other students from round area.

But I didn't like that school because they were treating us like babies; our work was supposed to be Year 9 work, but we were getting like Year 7 work…[I was there] till Year 9 and a half. So probably 16…Then no school after that.

[Now mum's] got a house. It's not a temporary house. It's, I think, a house that she can live in until she passes away.

> *[I'm doing] hospitality…Certificate III and part Cert IV…[It was a] lot of writing. A lot of paragraph writing…25 pages, and you got double pages…not like easy and quick…I don't like sitting down. And we were doing a bar course where we had to learn how to make 10 different coffees. Like one was a half-coffee and half chocolate, like who drinks that? We practiced like holding plates and all that, but we didn't practice like pouring a drink and that, we just practiced making coffee and cleaning the coffee machine - it was so boring…I thought I was in the wrong class when I went there.*
>
> *I could get out there and start working…It'd be easy, kind of...Sort of have to - it helps you in the long run. Going to save - save for a car and all that stuff…Get a dog.*

Caring responsibilities

Some young people carried heavily responsibilities for the care of others. Some young women had children of their own, other young people supported a parent, sibling or friend with disability or mental health issues.

Marcie explained that when her aunty had had a baby, she had moved to live with her and support her. This meant starting at a new school where she knew no-one:

> *There was no-one, like, my friends. Like, everyone was just — they had their own routine and everything. No one, like, no one had the same personality. Everyone was just so serious. Everything was about sport or something, and all the people that were like me never went to school.*

After school, Marcie was looking after her baby cousin,

> *I didn't go out or do nothing. So, I can't meet friends. So, I was kind of like in this group, it was like the popular girls, but I was just separate. Like, I don't know. I sat there on my own.*

Marcie told us she would go to school each day, but sit in the playground through class time. Despite extensive absences, Marcie found the work 'easy as'. When it came to the end of year 10,

> *I did every single one of my assignments. Smashed out my exams and didn't pass because I didn't have a high enough attendance.*

Some participants could manage the academic challenge but had trouble meeting the attendance requirements and this resulted in an 'n' grade for failing to meet course requirements, which, however, did not reflect their capacities. Despite guidelines which require principals to issue at least two written warnings to students if they might be at risk of failing to meet attendance or other course requirements (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2019), the young people in our study who receive an 'n' grade were surprised and disappointed. They said did not know that they might not receive an ATAR as a result of absenteeism.

High mobility

Attendance was a challenge for all of the young people in the study, often because they moved home so very often. High mobility was strongly connected to family stress, absenteeism and then to a sense of being excluded. Moving home could be highly disruptive for young people's schooling. Some young people repeatedly moved to new homes with their families; others like Marcie moved between various family members, while some moved through a range of out-of-home-care placements or temporary accommodation. Bree told us that a series of foster care placements meant:

> Yes I did go to school but I found it hard to learn at school and stuff, because when you go to different schools they start in different levels. [I went to] probably about 11 primary schools, and then high schools would have been about five. […] I never really had a proper stable place. (Bree)

There is evidence that young people can remain in one school even when their placements are changing and that this often contributes positively to their educational outcomes (Fong et al., 2006). 'Five Minutes of Fame' shared a story that demonstrates how poorly–considered placements can have a huge effect on learning engagement, and indeed on the need for schools to advocate to keep students who have strong attachments to their school community.

Story 3: Five Minutes of Fame

I was previously homeless before… It's been an on and off thing since I was 13…I ran away from my parents' home and I was sleeping in an abandoned house…and I was trying to go to school without the school thinking anything. [After a few months], the police came, ambulance came…and then I went to my first foster home.

I was even suicidal at that age. I already had a few attempts with the first foster family…Something didn't go my way so I ran out and…tried to throw myself under the car. Then I…tried to hang myself off the clothesline…But yeah, it started pretty early.

[The foster family] were really good to me actually…I had to move because they were temporary…I was with them for a few months and we were getting really close…So I freaked out when they told me I was going and I moved…heaps far away.

They enrolled me into school and then, just when I was in that area, I felt isolated. Just because I felt like I stood out because I was the only kid from my ethnic background in the area, you know what I mean? I was — I kind of seen myself as an outsider — here's this little black kid come out of nowhere, who doesn't look like anybody else at all.

Yeah and I felt like I wasn't really normal. Then I had violent outbursts and stuff like that.

I was stealing money because I didn't want to be there. So I'd use the money for public transport to go see old friends and food along the way. Just whatever I needed…I've always had to do that as a young person. Even when I was living at home my parents weren't really wealthy. There'd be days where we'd go to school without lunch.

I'm not 100 per cent sure where I moved next. [It was a] shared house and the carers on rotating shift…I wasn't even enrolled in school. I missed out on so much schooling already. [The High] School didn't take me because I had a bad history in public school already. Because I got suspended quite a lot… and academically-wise I wasn't really doing so well after I hit Year 3, Year 4. They just thought I'd be a bad influence on all the other kids. Besides by the time it came to enrolling I'd be moved already because of I'd play up.

Well, I was long enough to be enrolled in a school and I went to school for — I don't know how many days I went, but to be honest I only remember two days. [I] had a fight with another kid at school…Then the teachers tried to restrain me and they took me in a room and then they were trying to hold me down and I started hyperventilating. So I literally just raged and then I started smashing everything in that room…But that happened after I got sexually assaulted [in care]. So yeah, I don't know, I just couldn't handle my emotions or I didn't really speak. I was — always bottled up everything.

So they enrolled me into a behavioural school…I got there and it was okay for a little bit. But I deserved better. Because at the time, as silly as it sounds, I thought I was smarter than these people here. It's a slack thing to say but I just didn't think I was excelling in any way.

I wanted to be normal as well. So I was put on a probation thing where it was up to me to do the hard yards to get back into mainstream school. If I behaved for a set period of time and do my schoolwork and stuff like that. It took seven months for me to get there but I got there. I went back into mainstream high school. Yeah, so I accomplished that.

I don't know who paid for it or whatnot, but I had a teacher's aide…He'd sit with me and help me get through my schoolwork and stuff. Or if I fatigued through the day he'd pull me out of class and have a little chat ra, ra, ra and just constructive criticism and stuff. We got along heaps good. But I think the funding ran out or something like that.

[Then] I ended up moving again.

Five Minutes of Fame's story illustrates the system failures experienced by a young man who was committed to school. He made huge efforts to attend a school where he felt safe and felt that he belonged to. He was eventually moved far away by child protection authorities and not offered the right education supports for him to integrate into a new school community. The adverse events in his life spiralled. The resources to support this integration into a new learning community were eventually made available. While these system failures clearly lay with several government departments, he was in contact with and valuing school at the time when preventative resources might have been deployed. Instead he was faced with school exclusionary learning options, which undermined his sense of himself as an intelligent competent learner.

Disability, mental health and education

Schools have an obligation to ensure that students with disability and additional learning and support needs can participate in education on the same basis as their peers at every stage of their school life. The complexity of engaging with education was compounded for young people with disability or learning needs beyond the accepted 'norms'. Some participants were quick to offer their status as a person with a disability or with additional needs as part of their account of why they did poorly at school.

Anna told us that she's "got dyslexia and that, so I find it really hard at school."

Others, like Arkanese, were too busy to sit still and learn in the way that school required and a number identified with having a learning disability (typically ADHD). Jake, for example, found school challenging from the very beginning:

> In kindergarten I was pretty bad…like I had ADHD and that, and I have like a short attention span…I used to just pick on kids and just annoy everyone and hit people. (Jake)

Alicia explained that it had taken years to adjust her medication so that she could concentrate in class.

> Probably around year four I got diagnosed with ADHD and ODD, and I take tablets to control it … to help me focus in class and stuff……But it started screwing with my brain and my appetite and everything. Eventually we went to [another] psychiatrist, and now he prescribes me on like a 27 milligram, and that one just helps me focus.

Young people described some extremely difficult experiences at school when times are tough sometimes resulted in anxiety or depression. Angelica explained the long impact of abuse on her ability to connect with other children at school:

> Something happened to me in primary school…it affected me a lot when I was a little kid. I was kind of a sad anxious kid after that. Like I had bad anxiety when I was younger and I couldn't talk or play with people properly for a bit. I'd had two friends in kindergarten and they were the only two friends I had throughout the whole of primary school. I couldn't really talk to people. (Angelica)

The effort required to manage mental health made it difficult for some young people to take part in study or the social life of school. Alice explained what it took for her to persevere through school despite experiencing depression, anxiety and self-harm (showcased in case study 4). Tatiana shared similar sentiments:

> I started self-harming and they didn't like that. They got very impatient…I tried to self-harm in class. I threatened to jump off a second storey building. That's when they put me in hospital for a week, a mental health hospital. (Tatiana)

When their mental health was supported, some managed to attend and engage in schooling. Phillip Coleson told us:

> Well over the past year it's been a bit of a smooth road. Things have gotten better, like my depression and anxiety has decreased. I've been attending school a lot more frequently, to the point where I've only missed three days, four days all year. (Phillip Coleson)

Most often however, managing extremely difficult experiences and mental ill health meant that some of the young people in our study found it difficult to meet school norms around behaviour. Like Five Minutes of Fame and Arkanese, other young people struggled with explosive emotional energy they could not contain. Often they offered insightful reflections about their past behaviour.

> *It was back and forth with my parents and…I think it did have an effect on my behaviour at school. I think what's caused all the behaviour problems, because I wasn't getting the attention I needed at home so I probably got the attention more at school. (JS)*

This posed considerable challenges for their schools, but the responses from schools varied. Sometimes students were excluded from school, at other times they were enrolled in specialist support classes or schools for specific purposes (SSPs, also known as 'special schools'). Some were directed towards flexi-schooling options that provided alternative ways to engage in high school learning. We will discuss this schooling option later on in this report.

Barriers, blind alleys and school pathways

As noted in the policy section there are multiple pathways through the education system. However, these pathways were not always clear (Skattebol et al., 2015) and many young people had considerable periods where no schooling was available to them.

Young people described schooling structures and processes that made it very difficult for them to develop narratives as strong and capable learners. Five Minutes of Fame was one of the young people we interviewed who reported being excluded from school because of his behaviour. He explains that when it came time to enrol in high school, his local school refused to accept him.

> *[One] Public School didn't take me because I had a bad history in public school already. Because I got suspended quite a lot when [I was younger]*

Annie was also initially refused entry to a nearby school:

> *It took a while to actually get me into [the] High School. They didn't want me there. Yeah. I've seen the letters. My carer thought that it was because I was a foster kid they didn't want me there. Because I had heaps of kids in my street, the [same street] that we lived in and they were going to that school…So then DoCS [FACS] ended up getting involved. Called the school and then they ended up having to accept me in. (Annie)*

Annie was ultimately able to enrol after considerable persistence on the part of her foster carer. Five Minutes of Fame did not have that opportunity, explaining that he had moved yet again before negotiations with the school had reached a point where he might enrol. These negotiations had an impact on young people's sense of welcome and belonging at school which is a significant predictor of outcomes (Allen et al., 2018).

Some of the young people were removed from mainstream classes in their high schools and put into specialist support classes where they had lower student–teacher ratios and training in how to manage their behaviour. BL described the specialist class that he attended at his school campus:

> *Oh it was all right, had a relaxed time every morning. Yeah, it was only five other people in the class…But I always got in trouble there. You've got these, [performance measures] you make it days after days and then you get moved up, you got to one class, see how you go at one class, then after you move up…After you move up another level, they'll give you another two more classes.*

Just if you get in trouble, you go all the way back to the beginning. I was nearly done, out of the class, and then I just stuffed up…I just got in trouble, like I missed a few days. So it was like, "All right, you haven't been here, you've been in trouble, we're just going to put you back at the start again." So you've got to earn your way all the way back up. It's like, 'Far out!' (BL)

While this specialist class clearly gave BL a way to continue at school, there is no sense in his description of the class that he found it engaging or interesting. In fact he described it more as an extended punishment that he needed to work through. Like many other participants, Arkanese felt undervalued and poorly recognised because the school work was targeted well below her year level and she was not challenged at all by the academic work.

Schools as resources

Despite the challenges that schools posed for many young people, they also acted as a significant source of support. Given the complexity of their home lives, access to the resources of the school was extremely important at times. For some young people in our study, school acted as a respite from home. One young woman told us:

I've been in school since I was like four years old. It's my routine, it's rhythm, it's my stability. (Rachael)

Schools facilitated access to material resources such as computers and providing food to students who could not consistently source such items at home. Kiwi told us that the school gave him lunch when he did not have any. Others told us that they borrowed laptops from the school.

But schools also offered students access to other relational resources: social contact with peers; access to supportive adults in teachers, principals and counsellors; and referrals to other support services, as well as access to sport and extracurricular activities.

Friends and social support

The young people in our study often spoke about the value of friends at school. For Alice, as an example, school was the one place she could reliably connect with friends. Because her neighbourhood was so unsafe, Alice did not invite friends to visit, nor did she go out after school to see them because it was too difficult to get home before the dangerous neighbours, the 'rats', came out and threatened her.

> **Story 4: Alice**
>
> Alice was 15 when we met her the first time. She was living at home with her mum and two younger sisters. She was very committed to her schooling.
>
> *…I need to study a lot. I've been studying over the holidays, but I find it difficult when my sisters are yelling and my mum's really upset, and I just —like, I need to get this done.*
>
> *Mum gets really tired from all the stress, so sometimes I would do the dishes. I'd clean the house,… or I'd let the animals out… Sometimes I try and arrange social events for my sisters — like, 'Hey, let's go to the park!' But they end up fighting at the park. It gets to me.*
>
> *Alice explained at length how her neighbourhood was frightening and dangerous.*

I've had problems…it's just the people outside and where I live. I have to walk to and from school, and even then I have to make sure no one's out. If people are out, I just have to keep walking with my head down, hope they don't notice me otherwise I'll be called rude names, or — I remember one time I was coming home from school and I just got abused.

It's really time-limited, because when I do get out of the house I have to rush, and I have to be back before sunset because they come out in crowds like rats at sunset — or like bats. That's when everything really goes bad. Always at night-time.

Usually it's over the internet with my friends, or at school …I can't invite people over, and … I can't really tell my friends where I live either, because they judge it. So I just have to pretend I live in a mansion somewhere on a hill... No, I don't say I live in [the public housing suburb], but I can't say that if I wanted to…because their parents know about this specific place.

[Starting high school] was when everything became problematic, because it's just a change in my life and it's, like, really difficult. I guess it was because all these new kind of values about yourself that are introduced, and like peer pressure, and everyone's — not everyone, but people drinking, and smoking, and swearing…Then it's like you have to start wearing make-up…If I wore what they wore, maybe they would accept me, but you still won't get accepted…I think every kid goes through it. I think it just affects some people more than others.

Well, there were certainly a lot of people who knew I was struggling [with my mental health] but no one kind of said, I think you need help. They kind of asked if I was okay. It was kind of like people ignored it. If you know someone is struggling you shouldn't just let it slip. But that's what it felt like it was for me. So I had to go out and get help by myself which I did not like because it was really scary. Maybe if one of my friends maybe said — suggested going to a school counsellor or if one of the teachers suggested it I would have maybe have taken a step towards that rather than taking the blame on myself.

I didn't feel like talking to my school counsellor because — like, she's nice, but I don't feel confident with her, so I just thought over the phone would be better... I remember this one time I called Kids Helpline but it kept ringing and ringing and no one would answer, so you had to call and call. And it's really difficult …like I was going to harm myself or something… so I just had to keep ringing for days and days.

Today, in year 10, meeting school expectations is exhausting.

Some of the classes you're in, they expect you to have a week worth of learning the topic, but sometimes it still doesn't sink in. You're like, I haven't learned enough, and the questions on the test are, like, so bizarre, and you're so confused.

It's crazy. It's stupid, because there's so much pressure nowadays, because you need jobs, you need to have a social life. You need to be able to get your assignments done on time. You have to help out at home as well, and it's —it's so much. At the end of the day, you're buggered. You're so tired.

Callum also told us how important it was to have good friends at school.

There's this other guy who is a really best mate…We always used to hang out and we still do. He helped me a lot — [cheered] me up and stuff…I'm starting to like school more…I looked at my friends and they were all starting to do the right thing. That sort of influenced

me to do it as well. I'm just thinking about what would happen if I keep buggering up and stuff. (Callum)

Another one of our respondents was grappling with their gender identity through secondary school. A school friend was a great source of support during that time.

He knew that he was trans ever since he was I think 14. He and I — we just connected. He had a much better support network than I did. So he sort of showed me the reins of trans life.

Of course, school friendships were not always easy and not always supportive. Social issues were the cause of great difficulty for many of the young people. But for many, school provided an opportunity to form strong bonds with peers that were a source of support through tough times. Many of their closest relationships were first formed at school. Some schools enabled young people to have special roles so they had a place in the school community.

One young person told us of their advocacy role in the school:

I'm our school's youth advocate, though sometimes it's not recognised by teachers, but most of the time it is. Because I am the person everyone approaches to talk to and I'm the one who puts forwards the unorthodox and unpopular ideas that are well needed in our school.

This gave this young person a respected place among peers and in the school while supporting a positive self-story of being an advocate for students who were less strong, confident and willing to speak up.

Engaging in recreational activities

With little money to spare at home, school was one of the few places young people told us that they engaged in sport. For some, this was a valued activity at school that they loved and which contributed to their physical and mental wellbeing. Anita told us about how she came to endurance running through school.

I think Year 4 is the year that primary school kids are allowed to enter in cross county. I'm not quite sure but I did a [tour] around primary school and then I've just been doing it ever since. Each year they bring up the kilometres so now we do six kilometres. So I just practice for six kilometres. Yeah, I really enjoy it…I feel so relaxed and Zen at the end. (Anita)

A couple of the young men told us how important the opportunity to play sport at school had been in their friendships. Phillip Coleson, for example, said

He said, 'Why don't you play rugby with us?' I started playing rugby. They said I was pretty good at it and I was kind of accepted in their group, which was pretty cool. (Phillip Coleson)

Other young people told us that school offered a chance to participate in dance and drama classes.

Respectful and supportive adults at school

Respect from teachers was paramount for young people who remained in school. The importance of supportive adults at school was stressed by many of the young people we spoke to. JS, for example, told us he felt well supported everywhere except home:

> *I think there's pretty good support now, to be honest. You've got [key Youth services], all those places will support you. In school, you've got homework classes, you have learning support, you have counsellors at school. At my school, we have counsellors, we have people that will help us with our assessments, the educators that reply to our emails and they help us with our assessments and whatnot. The only support I probably would need is from family, but I can't really push them to do that. But that's life. (JS)*

The young people told us stories of the powerful impact adults at school made on their lives: positive stories of adults who were respectful, understanding, kind, patient, available and resourceful; and of the negative impact of adults who were distant, lacking in understanding and sometimes unkind.

Avery explained the difference between her teachers:

> *I had a few nice ones that were understanding if I didn't want to like speak up in front of class, like public speaking and stuff like that. Others are mostly just teachers who hate kids. (Avery)*

> *I had a really nice English teacher who would let me borrow books cause I'm a lover of books. She'd let me borrow them and take them and read them. So that was a pretty good year, year seven. (Avery)*

Just one good teacher, who was kind enough to lend her books, made year seven a good year for Avery. These positive experiences also meant that students looked for other teachers they thought they could trust.

Some students had particular relationships with teachers' aides or mentors who worked closely with them at school. As Five Minutes of Fame explained in Story 3, his mentor helped him get through each day by helping with school work and keeping him engaged. While Callum's friends were important as noted above, a teachers' aide helped him realise the long-term importance of keeping out of trouble.

> *Well, because I just got back from suspension [and] I was talking to Mr Christos, I kept thinking if I keep being suspended and stuff it's not going to look [good] on my resume and I'm not going to get an education and all that and I'm not going to get a good job. So I'm just going to keep my head down and work and that's what I've started doing this week and last week. (Callum)*

A couple of young people had particularly close relationships with school principals. These appeared to be especially important connections in their student lives, offering a safe place in the school and a trusted authority who could make arrangements within the school that could accommodate the complexity of the young people's lives. Tatiana explained how her school was 'fairly supportive':

> *Well they were there for me if I needed time out. I could go sit in the office or if I needed someone to talk to I could talk to the Principal, I could talk to my learning adviser. (Tatiana)*

School counsellors offered a formal mechanism in the school for the provision of support for students with complex lives. But the young people in our study had ambivalent or negative attitudes towards school counsellors. When Atlanta discussed her school counsellor, she captured the opinion of many of the young people we spoke to.

> *But I did have a counsellor in high school. One session with her and I just wanted to get out. They're overly nice. They're not straightforward. They don't tell you their intentions. The only thing they really say is, "What's happening with you right now?" A lot of crap and I don't trust you, nor do I want to talk to you about it.*
>
> *I know that's a complex situation for government facilities because teachers can't really be the counsellors because, just reasons. I know that. Even though you trust your teachers more…whereas you're put in a room with a counsellor you don't know, you don't want to know and you're told, "Tell me your life. Tell me what's wrong with you now." "No, thank you!" (Atlanta)*

Many of the young people had contact with school counsellors at some point, but not many were positive about that experience, they were not sure they could trust the counsellor, partly because the counsellor was unknown to them, and some found sessions with the counsellor unhelpful.

However, a couple of young people told us about good experiences with school counsellors. Some told us about counsellors and youth workers who made an effort to be known by all students by spending time with then outside at lunch. Silvia was glowing about her school counsellor and her homely respite space:

> *The school counsellor that we absolutely adored, she was wonderful…if you needed to get out of class because your head was buzzing or something you could just go in there and sit there and not even talk. She had — do you remember those scoobie strings that they used to make key rings and bracelets and things out of? She had those. She had colouring in before it was this big fad thing. She had yarn and crochet hooks and stuff like that. She had books and she had board games. It was this tiny little room. ... The walls were bookshelves and they were crammed with crap. It was the best room…It was always really comfy and comfortable.*

Silvia's school counsellor provider her with a safe space in the school where she could calm the 'buzzing' in her head. For Silvia, this comfortable room full of stuff was just what she needed when the classroom became too difficult.

Importantly, young people found a place for themselves at school when adults recognised and validated their needs and attachments.

Reauthoring narratives about schools, teachers and learners

Saunders and Munford (2016) found that young people with complex needs who were resilient at school were engaged in a number of practices: trying to fit in, searching for narrative coherence, authoring an alternative self-story, fostering a sense of belonging, or reauthoring the educational narrative thread.

Some participants in the study were able to maintain a narrative of self as a successful learner like Rachael, who mentioned school as one of the stabilities in her life. She was able to hold this narrative of being a successful learner even where she transgressed the usual criteria for being a 'good' student:

> *I had a point to prove I guess. I always did. Because if I get told I can't do something, it makes me want to do it more…I was a good student apart from the fact that I was doing drugs at school and I was drugged up at school. But I was always going to classes…Especially Year 10, I came first in nearly every single class. Even maths. That was because I was at one school for the whole year. (Rachael)*

Here, Rachael established narrative coherence through asserting her intelligence and tenacity. This allowed her to relate positively to the institution of school and to see this as a place where she could access resources. However, other young people with very negative experiences of school had a diminished sense of themselves as learners that they needed to overcome. Fern had been sent to work by her family when she was 12 and struggled with a sense of herself as a learner. She could trace her current fears about engaging with further education back to her early schooling experiences.

> *I just have a problem with like … I always had that fear every time someone will say, 'Oh go do a course,' like I've had that fear where, not really a fear but I would say it's a fear but I'm coping, I'm actually coping with what they're trying to say because you know how I only completed Year 7 and it's so frustrating for me to actually sit there and concentrate. (Fern)*

Several participants had to overcome a negative sense of themselves as learners that had been built up in mainstream schools that did not cater to their wellbeing and learning needs. These interruptions to oft–told personal narratives came from various places. Dave had a history of interrupted schooling from secondary school onwards. He was using drugs and engaging with crime and having trouble with school rules and attendance. However, he had a positive experience in the justice system where school became unavoidable:

> *I did school in juvie, that was part of the recommendation. I'm pretty smart actually. I'm pretty smart. Like even the teacher came up to me one day when I was doing my maths. She came over to me, and she was like, "Stand up." I was standing up, and she was like "This is the only person I've seen in a couple of years now who's got a 98% in maths". (Dave)*

These interruptions to negative storylines are critical for later educational engagement.

Flexi-schools offer an alternative to mainstream schooling; they aim to rebuild a positive sense of self in young people through individualised learning approaches. Being treated like an adult was one of the benefits of specialist schools for other young people. Jai, who attended a specialist secondary college, appreciated the relationship he had with teachers who showed respect for his maturity.

> *All in all the school is a very good place. The teachers were very helpful. They didn't treat you like you're a child like they would have at high schools or primary schools.*

> *The work wasn't very difficult, it was just given everything that's going during my schooling and having to look after my dad, because I'm a carer and all that, everything with police, and all other kinds of things, it was very difficult to meet the requirements that I needed to finish and get my Year 12. But all in all, they gave me a bit of leeway and helped me out and gave it to me. (Jai)*

As a young carer, Jai was used to responsibility, and at 20, he was older than most other students at the school. So he expected to be treated like an adult and was grateful that the specialist college provided that kind of respect. Moreover, the school was flexible and able to accommodate the complexity of his life and his care commitments so that, despite everything else that was happening for him, he successfully reached the end of year 12.

Young people in our study had highly varied experiences of how effectively educational content targeted the students' existing competencies. Cypress, a Pacifica young person, was identified as being in need of support to manage her behaviour, but she also needed schooling that was tailored to her educational needs. However, in the flexi-school she attended when she was 17, she was given work that did not challenge her intellectually; she told us she was marking time until she did not have to go to school anymore.

A couple of young people were attending a particularly flexible school alternative. Based at a local community college, they were largely studying at home on their own with the support of a coach or mentor. Amy explained how it worked:

> It's basically home-school, where they pick you up once a week…and they do work, and then they give you work to do over the course of the week. And then you go back to meet them with the work done. (Amy)

Rose went to the same school.

> It's really good. It's a lot better because it's like a one-on-one thing. You're a student and you have the coach that they give you, and then they get you to do the work. They give you the work to do and that's a lot. [Interviewer: What are the teachers like there?] I've only had one, but I've met her so many times and she always — she cares. She really just sits there and lets you work through it all. (Rose)

Flexi schools offered practical paced support that supported young people to reauthor educational narratives that were steeped in failure. Rose explained that she was encouraged to set goals for her education. Then the school gradually stepped her through the stages to reach those goals. Rose wanted to finish high school and enrol in TAFE or university. She explained that she is currently doing the equivalent of year 10.

> It's the equal. So, with what I'm doing now you get a Cert I in General Education for adults and then it continues into — because it's done in three and a half years, so the first year is Cert I and then the next half year is Cert II. So, once I finish what I'm doing now they have a Cert III. And they organise it so that you only have the work for one [stage], so that you're not worrying about the work for the next one. (Rose)

Rose valued the opportunity to take her schooling more slowly and to take one small step at a time towards post-secondary education.

Avery told us that she had transferred to a local senior college. After experiencing bullying at her previous high school, Avery found the new school much easier to navigate socially.

> The classes there are smaller and there are only two of them, the [year] nine and [year] ten and then the [senior years]…So we're a tight-knit class. The work, because we only have the one teacher and we do nine o'clock till — I do 1:40, 1:45, the classes are 40 minutes and we do the normal classes, science, history, English, geography, the other ones. You can do it till the end of Year 12. [And] they offer extra courses, like…Cert II in hospitality and I think one in community services and they also do a technology one.

> The change from school has really helped with the anxiety. Obviously, like I said, smaller classes, and the teachers understand that you don't want to be called up to the front of the class. It's okay to slightly sit back, they're giving courage. (Avery)

Avery appreciated the shortened school hours, explaining later that this meant she had time to socialise after school, which had not been possible when she was at mainstream high school. For

her, small classes with one teacher were more manageable than the variability of regular high school. She felt connected with her fellow students and her teacher.

As Avery says, alternative schools offered different routes through schooling and towards TAFE and university. Not all required students to complete the Higher School Certificate. Instead, some offered other senior curriculum (Board Endorsed Alternative Education Programs) to provide more flexibility in subjects, particularly the possibility of doing vocationally-oriented classes.

Stewart told us that he was surprised to discover, when studying for a Diploma, that he had an aptitude for learning.

> *It was a bit of a shock, yeah. A bit of a shock coming from the educators saying that my answers are of the high standards. I never really got that in school…I always go back and read [their comments]*

This gave Stewart a new narrative about himself as a skilled learner. Not only was he a good student, but one who worked to high standards, something he had never imagined in high school.

For most young people enrolled in alternative schools, a different kind of schooling experience was on offer. Sometimes for the first time, they felt that educational institutions were places where they could belong and where their interests were at the centre of their learning. This transformation happened because young people felt respected, felt that their learning goals were individually appropriate and relevant, were supported to connect socially and were highly supportive environments.

Schooling Expectations

Expectations about school are set by families, friends and schools. Many of our research participants could not rely on family to help them set expectations for their learning and school achievement. Yet like those in alternative education above, other young people welcomed eventually finding an adult to help with setting expectations.

Marcie had moved from her own family — who had themselves been failed by educational institutions and were dealing with constant crises — to the family of a very close friend. Here she experienced strict expectations about her attendance and attitude towards education. She told us Michela, her friend's mother, held the same expectations for Marcie as she did for her own children:

> *She treated me like her own. [Interviewer: So, what did she say about school?] Normal shit. Like, this is my household and I expect you to do the things that I say. Like, I expect you to do the exact same shit my kids would do. I wouldn't tolerate [my kids] wagging school. It would be the same with me.*

While Marcie found support for educational goals from a friend's family, others looked to schools for support setting schooling expectations. Phillip Coleson, for example, found a mentor to support him with his school work within the school.

> *We talk about things, or maybe we can work on school projects or assessments.*

The essential component of these supports is a belief in the young person's interest in pursuing education and in their ability to apply themselves with the right supports. Schools needed to recognise and emphasise young people's competence.

Finally, there was evidence that institutional practices could recalibrate to accommodate events where young people failed to meet the behavioural expectations without undermining the institution's authority. Callum had difficulty dealing with anger and sometimes had anger outbursts at school.

> *At my school, they get people whose behaviour isn't that good. They see more potential in that person. At the [behaviour] program I was bad but they said, "Just stop," and I stopped. So if you're bad they'll give you another chance. (Callum)*

The school organised for Callum to be part of an anger management program. When he had an outburst, he saw the school's actions to remove him from other students and teachers as reasonable, in part because the school then allowed him back in without punitive measures. Callum was able to weather these anger events and the consequences of them (exclusion for the day) without damage to his sense of himself as a learner or to the idea that school was for him.

Connected schools - resourcing and referrals

Many schools referred students to other services though school counsellors, teachers and other school staff. These referrals often proved to be an important resource for young people just starting to navigate their way through the service system. For Alex, a referral from a teacher led to support that he and his family very much needed:

> *There was one teacher, she used to be a youth worker, and she passed a [youth centre's] number onto my mum…I had left [home] and I actually found the youth centre like two weeks later because I was hungry. So I walked in and they were like, "We know you." And I was like, "Oh shit." I was angry at first. So then they were like, "We want to help." So then I got case managed, I think three days later. (Alex)*

Young people were most often connected to youth or mental health services. One person connected with the local youth service because a key worker regularly spent time at the school[7] and was available to students at times when they were not in crisis as well as when there was a crisis underway.

Referrals to other agencies made it possible for young people to continue in education. Phillip Coleson told us that his school had suggested that he apply for a mentoring program:

> *It was a school thing. They had approached me and asked if I would like to put in an application, like just for them to review and check over and stuff. So it came with a scholarship of $1000 to use on school resources and such…I was accepted and yeah, it's been pretty cool.*
>
> *…We go out for maybe an hour or two every week and we talk about things…But yeah, that's been nice to get out every now and then, just to do some things. (Phillip Coleson)*

For Rose, a referral from a school counsellor to a local youth service transformed her schooling experience. She recognised that the school counsellor had few resources compared to the youth service which "has the government and other organisations to help them with things." Her new youth worker "put us into programs and she's got me into…alternative learning." Rose felt that the counsellor believed in her right to education enough to persevere.

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[7] This idea of connected schools and there being 'no wrong door' is central to some interventions like the Geelong Project. See http://www.thegeelongproject.com.au

These descriptions of positive interactions with teachers and other adults were, without fail, imbued with emotional and attitudinal resources such as perseverance, adaptability, relationships and honesty. When these affective dimensions were present on the institutional side of the relationship, young people were able to meet their teachers with 'like' attitudes and engage in effective learning.

School transitions – small steps

For some young people there was a point at which high school was no longer a feasible option, either because they were too old or too disengaged. A few gave examples of community or youth services connecting them to other forms of education. Sometimes participating in a short course helped young people believe that study was something they could achieve. Alicia, for example, was referred by a family counselling service to a local community college where she was pleased to complete a first aid course. Phillip Coleson had believed he had no chance of passing his driving test, but then:

> I've certainly become a little more confident in how I may fare in certain things. Last year I was just absolutely positive that I would fail any kind of learner driver exam I'd taken, but I took it and passed…I passed and it was very emotional for mum and I. She was teary eyed. (Phillip Coleson)

While completing a course could deliver a sense of achievement, young people were often shuttled into courses because they were available and not because they matched the young person's interests or dispositions. Nat had been enrolled in many courses. She explained:

> Well I left school in year 11. Then I went to TAFE and I did year 11 again, but — I passed it. I got the certificate but I couldn't do year 12, so year 11 again was just a big waste of time for me, because I already had the certificate. Now I've got two. Then I went and did a business admin course at TAFE. I didn't finish that either. Then I did a course online at the employment service. I didn't finish that either. Then I got onto the Warehousing course. Finished that. Then the Business course was like two weeks after that. I did that, finished that.

This process of finding the 'right' course needed good guidance from a case worker or someone close to the young person. Annie was explicit that support to engage in education, especially finding courses outside of school, was something that young people with complex home lives needed, because there had been no adults to teach them those skills.

> [My sister] needs help with getting into another course and stuff. She doesn't know — we don't know, because no one's taught us. (Annie)

The right course at the right time could be transformational. Nat explained:

> There's like a trainer and there's this lady that comes in. She was in there most of my first certificate. She would always bring in food and stuff, so that made you want to go. Always cake and lollies and chicken.

> My whole personality changed when I started going there. To people in courses I was really quiet and I held back a lot. I didn't really trust people. Just something about meeting new people; I just didn't have that trust because I went through so much crap in the past. So I didn't have that kind of trust. I told my trainer on the first day, "I'm" … in my little tiny soft voice,"I'm like, I'm like, I'm not good with learning. It goes in one ear and out the other".

> She was "Oh don't worry. We'll work on it". The way that she taught me, they did a class test and I said, "no I want to do it by myself" and then "I'll mark it when you guys mark it".

So I did it by myself and when they were going through saying all the answers all my answers were correct. So I was like proud of myself and I felt really good. Just being in the environment where our whole class became friends, it brought on my confidence. So now I can actually go — I can use my voice now. Yeah. Then when I went to my second course the class was really shy and I was different. I realised how different I was.

Several of the young people we interviewed had plans to study at university. They were proud of their significant achievement of even conceiving of plans for tertiary education. These young people showed tenacity and resourcefulness throughout their schooling. When Atlanta explained her plans, her strength and pride sang out.

I'm going to go to university and I'm just going to smash it. I'm going to get out there and I'm going to do something. It is a plan of mine but it's a long term plan, something I'm working towards. I guess my ATAR's got to come first. (Atlanta)

For other young people, short courses designed to lead to employment reinforced their lack of interest in desk based work. Akanese is one such young person; intelligent and keen to engage in the world, she wanted to work with her hands. She explained that a hospitality course she was encouraged to do involved far too much reading. Moreover, after living with very little money for a long time, many wanted to start earning their own income. Alicia was planning to enrol in a traineeship that would allow her to keep studying while also being paid.

So next year I'm going to put in for TAFE with [the traineeship]…So that means hopefully I'll start getting paid for it as well. (Alicia)

JS had a similar plan. He had tried to look for work after school, but found the repeated knock-backs hard. Instead, he decided he would be better to invest his time in study with a view to better employment options.

When I was looking for work, I felt pressured...then it just got to a point where it was like, "I can't look for work anymore." That's why I made the change to do a course. And I think I've made a really good decision because, with work out there, if I get fired from a job, where's that going to leave me? No qualifications. No nothing…When I finish my diploma, I am planning to maybe try to get a job in the industry and then slowly do my Bachelor of Arts. (JS)

But finding work, some told us, was new and unknown and not something they felt prepared for. Rachael echoed the thoughts of other young people who were starting to think about finding a job.

They set me up with [an employment service]. I walk in there, get my name marked off and walk out. And they're just like, "Have you got a job yet?" [I'm like] "Have you helped me get a job yet?" Like I just finished school. I don't know how to get a job. I don't know how. I know how to write a resume, because school taught me how to write a resume, but I don't know how to go hand the resume in. I don't know what to wear. I don't know. I don't know how to work. I know how to go to school. I know how to study. (Rachael)

Post-school options for the young people in our study were a confusing maze. For some, this meant further study — ranging from very short courses to tertiary education. For others, it was time to find employment. Most, however, needed guidance to find their way onto the pathway that suited them best.

5 Conclusions

Most of the young people in this study valued education highly and they told us that completing schooling and participating in further education were important foundations for their adult lives. However, it was extremely difficult for all the research participants to remain engaged in education through adverse childhood events comprised of periods of high mobility and poverty, and often trauma and an enduring lack of safety. Many arrived at school tired and stressed and had interrupted attendance which affected their learning and peer relationships. As a result, many became disengaged early in high school, some in primary school. Despite feeling disengaged, young people nonetheless reported continuing to attend school through times of extreme difficulty at home, through homelessness, violence and abuse, while managing mental ill health and significant care responsibilities.

Many of the young people reported that school was an important resource. Sometimes adults they encountered at school were among the few who were supportive and reliable in their lives. This places a significant responsibility on schools to provide ongoing support for students' wellbeing so that they might continue in their education and to support young people in developing a positive narrative about their schooling selves (Saunders & Munford, 2016). Young people in schools could benefit from:

- Recognition by schools of the significant commitment to schooling young people show by attending school through the most challenging times of their lives

- Recognition of young people's contributions to their own families and of their competencies in independent living.

Throughout their narratives, young people discussed school as a place in which they could connect with peers. Powerful and enduring friendships were made at school for some. For others, school was one of the few places where they could connect with their friends if they had little money or time to socialise outside of school. Some young people who had very interrupted schooling were not able to make friends with peers except for those living with similar hardships.

Some of the resources that young people valued at school included material resources such as food, computers and books and access to physical activities such as dance and sport.

- Care could be taken to provide ready access to school resources for young people who cannot access these resources at home. Facilitating use of school resources should be done with discretion so that young people do not feel shamed about their home lives in the school community.

For the National School Reform Agreement (2019) to be effectively implemented, schools need to have strategies in place to reach all students so that those in need can be readily identified and the school can access the resources available to them on their behalf.

Wellbeing frameworks in schools need to be strengthened and more consistently followed at the school level. Despite the framework for a collaborative approach offered by the NSW School-Link Memorandum of Understanding to improve the mental health of students, our study provides

evidence that more attention needs to be given to the skills and know-how of school personnel on the ground.

School counsellors were generally not well regarded by the young people in this study, often because, unlike their teachers, the counsellor was not someone they knew and trusted, but also because they found their sessions with the counsellor to be unhelpful.

- Funding for school counsellors should include time to get to know young people so that they can become a trusted adult within the school. Time spent with students outside the counselling room will build bonds with students who might need support which counselling sessions could develop. Counselling rooms work best when they are legitimated as places of respite.

Nonetheless, many young people felt that adults at school who connected them with community supports had transformed their lives. Often, these referrals allowed young people to continue in education and some described connections being made to mentors and to alternative schooling pathways.

- Schools should maintain strong connections with local community services, especially youth services. Inviting services into the school would help build these connections and facilitate access to alternative sources of support for students.[8]

- Young people and their families need brokers so they are not navigating these systems on their own at times when they may be in crisis.

- Young people who are highly mobile would benefit from an educational case worker who can ensure connections to schools are made and maintained, or enable access to alternative education.

Education policy continues to be grounded in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* which enshrines the right of all students to a place in school. However, some participants in this study found they were refused entry to new schools or could not maintain the constant re-enrolment process and so were unable to attend school for periods of time.

- No student should be denied entry to school. Education is a right for all young people. There needs to be greater regulation and accountability at a local level to ensure that schools meet this obligation.

Not surprisingly, complying with school expectations around behaviour could be difficult with such complex home lives. Some of the young people reported being enrolled in special classes at school that offered support with behaviour management, but did not engage them at an appropriate academic level.

- Behaviour classes, units and schools need to pay attention to young people's sense of themselves as learners, to build on their existing competencies in navigating hardship

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[8] See evaluation of the community of services and schools model - Geelong project
http://www.thegeelongproject.com.au/project-achievements/

- Students' academic work should always be targeted appropriately, ideally with individually tailored goals, regardless of other specialist support that young people need.

- While some young people need support in learning how to comply with school norms around behaviour, this support should be provided in a way that is not stigmatising. Ideally, such support should be individualised, through mentoring or small group support.

Young people told us that alternative schools offered flexibility and good support. Their study programs were developed to focus on their individual learning goals and provided a wider range of subjects, including vocational training. Students were supported in their study one-on-one or in small groups. The alternative schools were more flexible in terms of daily time commitments and the required timeframe for completion. Young people typically described alternative schools as respectful environments in which they could redefine themselves as competent learners. However, these schools did not always provide meaningful or academic learning opportunities and some funnelled young people into skills for low paid occupations.

- Alternative pathways through education should be clearer and more readily available to young people, as access to more flexible supportive education can be transformative.

- Alternative pathways need to provide academic challenges and routes into post-secondary education.

Some young people wanted to follow other paths to adulthood. After many unrewarding years at school and living so long with few resources, they wanted to secure employment and earn their own income.

- Learning goals for some students should include vocational skills and pathways to viable, sustainable and decent work.

In light of the review of senior secondary pathways commissioned by the COAG Education Council, this report shows that young people in adverse circumstances have many skills to bring to their lives after school, but that they need substantial support to be able to take up resources in the system. Education was a highly important resource for the young people in this study. While many had disrupted schooling that was not always a positive experience, most recognised the importance of education for their future lives. Their commitment to education through extremely challenging times was impressive. Young people especially valued respectful learning environments that were supportive and flexible.

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