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Dis/Engagement in secondary schools

Towards truancy prevention

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a research project investigating the factors which lead to dis/engagement in secondary schooling for young people with a history of truancy. In 2013, Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi (a South Island Attendance Service provider) commissioned this research in order to better understand the complexities of factors leading to dis/engagement of young people in secondary schools.

Data was collected and analysed from a range of sources including interviews with young people, whānau, and experienced practitioners working in the field of truancy and attendance; as well as published research. This approach to data collection is consistent with the model of *Evidence-Based Practice*[1] which acknowledges the critical voice of young people in informing practice, in addition to other sources.

A Model of Youth Development through Education is suggested here which draws together key themes from the findings of this research, along with existing research in the field. The model draws upon youth development research[2], and suggests that practitioners and schools need to be cognisant of a range of complex issues facing dis/engaged young people, and these may be grouped in to the following two categories:

- o *Relational factors* affecting dis/engagement in schooling (with a focus upon friendships and belonging, relationships with teachers, personal challenges including learning difficulties and/or stress, whānau challenges, and wider school support)

- o *Learning factors* affecting dis/engagement in schooling (with a focus on getting help with learning / learning difficulties, choice/autonomy, and pedagogical variation in the classroom).

In many instances these factors are inter-connected. For example, where there are significant relational challenges, the need for learning support is likely to increase. Furthermore, in nearly all contexts, young people became disengaged in schooling because there were a number of challenging factors impacting upon their ability to connect, both within and outside of school.

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[1] Bourke, R., Holden, B., & Curzon, J. (2005). *Using evidence to challenge practice. A discussion paper*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, New Zealand.

[2] Wayne Francis Charitable Trust. (2011). *Positive youth development in Aotearoa: Weaving connections – Tuhonohono rangatahi.* www.wfct.org.nz.

Not surprisingly then, this research found that effective practitioners recognised the need to work in collaborative, multi-systemic ways to support young people toward engagement. Consequently, the findings of this research indicate that there are a range of implications for practitioners and policy including the need to develop more robust approaches which incorporate:

    i.   Culturally relevant practice, with a focus on Māori and Pasifika
    ii.   Effective communication with families/whānau
    iii.   Relating to young people
    iv.   Collaborative, multi-agency practice
    v.   Informed practice, with a focus on understanding the impact of stress on learning, and the importance of mental wellbeing for young people, and
    vi.   Early intervention

Policy implications were raised by practitioners around two of the themes: (1) the need for early intervention as in many cases disengaged young people present with difficulties in primary and intermediate school years, and; (2) the need for increased policy direction around more effective collaborative, multi-agency work.

Further research and professional development in these areas may enhance the opportunities for young people to engage in education further. The findings from this research are published in a resource for practitioners titled: *Positive Youth Development through Education: Addressing Issues of (Dis)Engagement in Aotearoa / New Zealand Schools*[3].

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[3] Bruce, J. (2014). *Positive Youth Development through Education*. www.teorahou.org.nz

1. Background and Rationale

In Aotearoa / New Zealand, both schools and parents and/or legal guardians are responsible for ensuring students regularly attend school between 6 and 16 years. *National Administration Guidelines[4]* require that all schools are emotionally and physically safe learning environments and students who are not achieving – or who are at risk of not achieving – are identified. Furthermore, schools are required to ensure that effective learning plans are developed for all students, and this includes students with unjustified absences.

In 2012, a Ministry of Education report indicated that unjustified absences were at a rate of 2.3 per 100 students[5]. Both unjustified absences and non-enrolment rates increased sharply after year 8. Unjustified absences were also significantly higher for Māori (4%) and Pasifika (3.4%) compared with NZ European (1.6%) and Asian (1.3%). Furthermore, in decile 1 and 2 schools the unjustified absence rate was higher for all ethnic groups (up to 5.6% for Māori in decile 1 schools compared with 1.7% in decile 10 schools). Non-enrolled students reflect similar trends, with Māori and Pasifika students being more likely to become non-enrolled.

Additionally, the 2012 Ministry of Education report[6] on non-enrolled figures indicated a significant rise in non-enrolled students between age 11 (2.4 per 1000 students) and age 14 (16.5 per 1000 students). In 2012, 66% of non-enrolment notifications were for students from decile 1-4 schools. Furthermore, the Ministry reported a strong correlation between NCEA Level 1 achievement and students with a non-enrolment history (88% did not achieve NCEA Level 1 Literacy and Numeracy compared with 26% of students attending school regularly). It was further noted that "regular school attendance is one of the most significant factors influencing student achievement…and that chronic truancy is a strong predictor of negative outcomes in later life including violence, delinquency, substance abuse, unemployment and early parenting" (Ministry of Education, 2012b, p.1).

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[4]http://www.education.govt.nz/ministry-of-education/legislation/nags/

[5] Ministry of Education. (2012a). *Truancy from school*. Retrieved from: www.educationcounts.govt.nz.

[6] Ministry of Education. (2012b). *Non-enrolled students*. Retrieved from: www.educationcounts.govt.nz

In 2013 the Ministry of Education established the *Attendance Service*[7] with the aim of supporting schools to:

- effectively manage attendance;
- reduce unjustified absence rates and non-enrolment; and
- reduce the time taken to return students to education.

The *Attendance Service* is an amalgamation of the previous *Non-Enrolled Truancy Service* and the *District Truancy Service* into one integrated service. A key aim of the *Attendance Service* is to "support schools, parents/family/whānau, iwi, Pasifika groups, the community and interagency services to improve learner attendance and ensure a seamless, collaborative, effective, efficient and culturally responsive service for students and schools" (www.education.govt.nz/attendance-services).

Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi is the *Attendance Service* provider for the Westland, Nelson, Marlborough and Canterbury regions. As a newly established provider, *Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi* sought to develop a resource for practitioners working in the education sector which explores factors contributing to dis/engagement in schooling. The research findings in this report informed the development of a practitioner resource to develop best practice to support school attendance and achievement. This report is a compilation of international and national research, as well as practitioner, young people and whānau voices on dis/engagement particularly at a secondary school level.

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[7] http://www.education.govt.nz/attendance-services

2. Purpose and Scope of the Study

2.1. Aims of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors which contribute to engagement and disengagement in secondary schooling for young people at risk of truancy within Christchurch. Young people with a history of truancy and their parents were invited to participate in this research, as well as experienced practitioners working in the field of truancy and attendance. The findings from this study informed the development of a resource for use by Attendance Services, schools, and other related practitioners seeking to enhance opportunities for young people at risk of disengagement from schooling[8].

2.2. Definition of Key Terms

Young person/young people: Throughout this report the terms 'young person' and 'young people' will be used more frequently than 'student' or 'students'. While student(s) typically refers to the young person in direct relationship to learning and schooling, a young person or young people, signifies that: (1) a young person exists in relationship with their whānau, peers, and the wider community; (2) that these relationships are primary and that schooling is in fact mostly secondary; and (3) that their needs are developmentally holistic and relate also to whānau, peers, and community, rather than being limited to just schooling matters.

Consistent with Ministry of Education absence definitions, the following terms are used throughout this report[9].

> *Unjustified absence:* unexplained or unjustified full day absence
> *Intermittent unjustified absence:* unexplained or unjustified part day absence
> *Truancy:* the sum of unjustified and intermittent unjustified absences

The term *whānau* is used in this report to refer to parents, legal guardians, as well as immediate and extended family. This term represents the idea of family in its immediate and broader contexts.

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[8] Bruce, J. (2014). *Positive Youth Development through Education*. www.teorahou.org.nz

[9] For further definitions relating to absence and attendance, refer to:
http://www.education.govt.nz/school/running-a-school/technology-in-schools/managing-data/sharing-data/electronic-attendance-register/

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected and analysed from a range of sources including interviews with young people, whānau, and experienced practitioners working in the field of truancy and attendance; as well as published research. This approach to data collection is consistent with the model of *Evidence-Based Practice*[10] which acknowledges the critical voice of young people in informing practice. This model acknowledges that while published research is vital to the development of evidence-based practice, also important are practitioner skills and knowledge, and young people and whānau wisdom and values. Thus in addition to the systematic review of international and national literature, data was collected and analysed from young people, whānau, as well as practitioners experienced in the field; and synergies are highlighted in order to inform practice.

2.4. Interview Participants

Young people with a history of truancy or non-enrolment were invited to participate in this study, as well as whānau, and experienced practitioners working in the field of attendance and truancy services. All young people interviewed were known to the *Attendance Service*, and the Attendance Advisors (kaiāwhina) assisted with the identification of young people for this research; furthermore, young people were selected because they had a relationship with kaiāwhina. Young people were invited to participate in an unstructured interview with kaiāwhina in a quiet place of their choosing. It was deemed important that young people felt safe and comfortable, and because they selected the venue for the interview and were interviewed by someone who was familiar to them, it was anticipated that this would create a more open context for conversation. Kaiāwhina employed an unstructured interview method which enabled them the flexibility to be guided by the young person's story. This style of interviewing meant that there were general topics and conversation starters. The interview topic guidelines were provided to kaiāwhina and these included the following:

- Tell me the things you like about school.
- Tell me the things you don't like about school.
- What about the teachers?
- Tell me about your favourite teacher.
- What about teachers that you don't get on with? Don't like? Don't understand? Etc.

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[10] Bourke, R., Holden, B., & Curzon, J. (2005). *Using evidence to challenge practice. A discussion paper*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, New Zealand.

- Other topics:
  - friends, bullying, relationships with others
  - activities such as sports and cultural activities
  - support from counsellors, youth workers, teachers OR no support at all
  - curriculum and lessons: understanding the work; struggling to read or write; not understanding instructions; what learning activities worked well / didn't work well
  - school hours, school rules, etc.
- Family ideas about school: What are the ideas? The likes and dislikes?
- For young people disengaged: What things would make a difference?
- For young people re-engaged: What things did make the difference?

Sixteen young people agreed to be interviewed, but difficulties with gaining parental and school permission coupled with kaiāwhina workload meant that just nine interviews were conducted. Given the limited sample size, caution needs to be taken when drawing conclusions. However, findings were consistent with existing literature in the field. All young people had a history of truancy and were, at the time of the interviews, reengaged in some form of education or training.

Unstructured interviews were also conducted with two parents whose children were previously truant, but who now both attend school (including Alternative Education) regularly. The parents were aware of the study and wanted to participate and share their experiences of parenting disengaged young people. The interviews were conducted by the lead researcher in this study, in a venue chosen by the parents and interview topics included:

- Introduction:
  - Your background
  - Experiences with your child at school
- What do / do not…………………that is / is not effective
  - Schools (teachers, pastoral care e.g. counsellors)
  - Agencies / community organisations
  - Peers
- Recommendations/advice for……………………………….
  - Practitioners
  - Other whānau
  - Principals and teachers, schools, etc.

Additionally, four experienced practitioners with a significant history (5 years or more) of work in the field of truancy and attendance participated in this study. The interviews were in depth and were conducted by the lead researcher in this study, and in a venue that suited the practitioners. All interviews were face to face, except one which was a teleconference. Interview topics included:

- Introduction:
  - Your background
  - Experiences in the sector
  - Motivation to work in the sector
  - General impressions of what is happening
  - Examples of best practice
  - Success stories
- What do / do not…………………that is / is not effective
  - Schools (teachers, pastoral care e.g. counsellors)
  - Whānau
  - Young people
  - MOE
  - Agencies / community organisations
- Recommendations/advice for……………………………….
  - Policy makers
  - Practitioners
  - Whānau
  - Principals and teachers, schools, etc.
  - MOE

2.5. Ethics and Limitations of the Study

Ethical approval was granted by the *University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee for Educational Research* and all policy, procedures and guidelines were followed to ensure ethical research was undertaken. To ensure anonymity, some demographics and circumstances from participants have been changed in the reporting of the findings. All names have been changed to protect anonymity. Kaiāwhina were informed that if young people disclosed information which deemed them at risk of harming themselves, or where someone else may be known to be harmed, then the Attendance Service Manager was to be informed. If young people became upset during the interview, then the kaiāwhina were to be reassuring and calm, and ensure that appropriate referrals were made and/or support networks, whānau, etc. were informed following the interview.

The study was limited by the number of young people and parents interviewed. Given the complexities facing many young people disengaged from schooling, it was perhaps not surprising that interviews scheduled were at times not able to be undertaken. Furthermore, where young people were interviewed, only information that they felt comfortable sharing with kaiāwhina was disclosed and while understandable and ethically appropriate, it is also worth noting that vital information may have been withheld. Additionally, parent interviews were limited to just two participants. Therefore, while a total of 15 participants were interviewed for this study, caution needs to be taken in terms of generalizing findings.

2.6. Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed before data analysis was undertaken. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. Data was coded by interview question, and then by theme. Data across the three participant groups was compared and contrasted to determine similarities and differences. Data was also compared and contrasted within the three participant groups. Data was analysed in light of similar published studies in the field, as well as giving consideration to the model of youth development[11] employed by *Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi*, the *Attendance Service* provider commissioning this study. This service provider was interested in similarities and differences that exist between the findings of this study and their existing model of youth development practice. They were particularly interested in ways of enhancing this model, and it was hoped that this study would provide greater insight.

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[11] Te Ora Hou contextualised an adaptation of the *Circle of Courage* model and this provides an operative and foundational model of youth development for practitioners. This includes a focus on strengthening within each young person: Whanaungatanga (Belonging & Identity), Pukengatanga (Mastery & Competence), Mana Motuhake (Independence & Responsibility) and Ohaoha (Generosity & Contribution). Additionally, other models have been adapted and applied to the youth development practice and these are explored in the following resource: Wayne Francis Charitable Trust. (2011). *Positive youth development in Aotearoa: Weaving connections – Tuhonohono rangatahi.* www.wfct.org.nz. This resource combines youth development and community development theory, practice and personal stories with the aim of informing good practice in the field.

3. Findings: What Young People are Saying

The findings presented in this section are the results of a thematic data analysis process, and includes data from all three participant groups: young people, parents and practitioners. Young peoples' perspectives are presented in the first part of this section, with some input from parents and practitioners. The practitioner views are presented in Section 4, and this includes implications for future practice.

3.1. Dis/engagement Factors Relating to Schooling

All young people interviewed expressed very clear views on mainstream secondary schooling – what they liked and didn't like. They were also eager to make recommendations for the ways in which schooling could be improved. In many ways their views were simple and achievable in terms of how student-teacher relationships and pedagogical practice could be shaped. During the data analysis phase, all participant responses (including young people, parents and practitioners) were coded into the following themes: what young people liked about schooling, including their favourite teachers (engagement factors); ways in which schooling could be improved (engagement factors) and what they didn't like about school (disengagement factors). Through this process of analysis it became clear that the following themes were evident: *Relationships with Teachers* (positive, funny and helpful), *Friendships and Belonging*, *Diverse Curriculum and Pedagogical Strategies*, and *Wider School Support*. *Personal Challenges Affecting Learning* was also identified as a key theme which related to factors outside of school leading to truancy, and this theme will also be discussed in this section.

3.1.1. Relationships with Teachers: Positive, Funny and Helpful

All young people were able to articulate clearly what they liked about their teachers (and what they didn't like!). This was perhaps the most prevalent theme with young people indicating the need for positive relationships with their teachers in order to learn. Practitioners were also aware of the critical link between relationships and learning, even going so far as to claim, *"Schools know that relationship is everything in education. Without relationship your kids won't learn"*. Another practitioner observed how *"the ability of the teacher to actually connect with [disengaged young people] is quite critical for them"*. For young people this centrality of relationships was also closely linked to the teacher's ability and/or willingness to help with learning. For example, Josh indicated that one of the most

important things he liked about school was *"teachers...how they are nice to you"*. Similarly other young people thought that *"it's better to have a teacher that's like your friend and everything"*, and they liked *"teachers being nice...being more positive and everything"*.

When asked about their favourite teachers, the young people were quick to acknowledge a sense of humour and being helpful as the two most valued qualities. Tasha explained that her favourite teacher is *"really funny, he like picks on us but it's in a funny way and he makes the whole class laugh and everything"*. Tasha liked teachers who were *"friendly, and do jokes...and then we actually get our work done"*. Similarly, Aroha noted *"he's just really fun and cool..."*.

In addition to positive relationships and a sense of humour, most young people indicated how much they needed help from their teachers and how grateful they were when individual help was given. The need for help from teachers was overwhelmingly clear from all of the young people interviewed. Tane suggested that two teachers in one class would allow for more help, and Ange suggested that schools could be improved by having:

> teachers that actually help you, that talk to you and tell you step by step on
> what you need to do, because I didn't get told that. I just got told to do
> this, and they wouldn't give me instructions or anything and, I'd just sit
> there and be like, what do I do? And it affected me so much.

Ange recalled one teacher who "actually helped me learn and he cared about my education, and he was just really easy to get along with, and I felt like I could talk to him if I needed to". Similarly, Hudson provided one example of the difference that individual help made:

> I had this teacher, he would always like come up and help me, individually
> and stuff, about it, try and help me and give me feedback and stuff, and
> um, yeah, same with um all my other classes, like most of my other
> classes, like they tried to help me because I'd like missed a lot [of classes].

Likewise, Tane commented on the way in which teachers "help you and teach you more...teaching you how to do it".

Young people were also very aware of the barriers to accessing help from teachers. Hudson recalled experiences where teachers barely acknowledged him. He described incidents where *"a couple of times when I was there, I'd sit at the back, he'd [the teacher] mark me absent,*

and um, I'd have to talk to the Dean and stuff, because he'd like just assumed that I wasn't there". Some young people attributed a lack of help and teacher-student relationship difficulties to large class sizes:

> There were heaps of big classes and only one teacher. And I felt like I
> didn't get all the support that I needed because I was going through a hard
> time, and they just didn't care…I was just like, my teachers for each class
> I went to didn't really know, because you had heaps of different teachers.
> And it was hard for them to keep up as well.

This quote also points to the transition from primary and intermediate school home room settings to secondary school which was seen by many in this study as extraordinarily problematic. This transitional and relational challenge was also a key theme noted by practitioners:

> They've come from a home classroom environment where they've had one
> or maybe two teachers that they've related to. They go to high school and
> they have to relate to the constant change, the confusion that goes with
> it…In a home room situation, an observant teacher knows that somebody's
> missed the boat on a subject. [But at secondary school] the Maths teacher
> may not pick it up, because the kid shuts up…loses concentration, and
> then they go off to Science or they go off to English or whatever…so they
> start to fall behind and they are not getting the one to one support that they
> would benefit from.

This one to one support referred to at the end of this quote is a critical issue that all young people discussed. They were adamant about their need for help from their teachers and this factor appeared to be significant for them in determining the level of engagement at school.

3.1.2. Friendships and Belonging

Most young people indicated that their friends were one of the things that they most liked about schooling. This is consistent with models of youth development[12] which recognise the centrality of belonging and friendships to the positive development of young people. This sense of belonging and the importance of friendship and support was also evident through a

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[12] Brendtro, L., Brokenleg, M. & Van Brockern, S. (2002). *Reclaiming youth at risk: Our hope for our future.* Solution Tree Press, Bloomington. https://reclaimingyouthatrisk.org/

young person's observation of an absence of it. One young person spoke of her feelings as *"an outsider"*, while another young person felt excluded through being constantly bullied, *"just when people annoy you. Like just there are really annoying people that piss you off, yeah...teasing as well, and like, making fun of you".*

3.1.3. Diverse Curriculum and Pedagogical Strategies

More than half of all young people indicated that 'practical' curriculum subjects such as Physical Education, Art, Music, and Technology were what they really enjoyed in school. These desires were linked to greater choice. For example, Aroha indicated that she would like more choice and variety in classes and *"a wide range of classes, like cooking...and more trips".* Additionally, a number of young people indicated that they would like to be able to do *"more stuff at lunchtime. There's nothing to do".* For example, one young person suggested the need to be able to use sports gear: *"like in primary school they had like a PE shed and you could grab equipment and stuff and actually do...then you go to high school. They don't even a have a rugby ball or anything [that you can use]...so you can't really do anything which is boring".*

Closely linked to a desire for diverse curriculum and greater choice, was the need for diverse pedagogical approaches in the classroom. Many young people reported how they were bored by the same teaching methods used by teachers at secondary school, and this included not being taught properly how to do something, as well as a lack of variety in learning opportunities, and not being allowed to talk. Aroha commented that class learning:

> gets boring...just kind of the same things over and over again, yeah. I just lose concentration easily, yeah, so it's kind of hard for me to focus, yeah...if I was in class and if we had to like sit down and just like do our work and couldn't talk and stuff I just don't like that, so don't really like the way they teach.

Tane provided an example of one teacher who:

> doesn't really listen. She just tried to make it her way, and half the people don't understand her way, and how she writes. Like you try and tell her and she just says that she'll send you out of the class and give you a detention.

3.1.4. Wider School Support

All young people reported how important it was to receive some form of support at school. This ranged from the school dean, supportive teachers, youth workers in schools, and outside agency support, such as *Check and Connect*[13] mentoring. For example, Hudson commented on the *24-7* youth worker *"he just like kind of hangs around and talks to us, and he organises events and stuff, which is pretty cool".* Hudson had also been supported by a *Check and Connect* mentor and he spoke of how the mentor had assisted him to get on a course for 2014. Ange spoke very highly of the school dean who was her primary support:

> My dean knew everything and she was really supportive…My dean was
> the only person I could go to. And she'd understand. Like everybody else
> really didn't care and they were just like out to get me because, I don't
> know why, but she was the only one that stuck by me and actually seen the
> good in me, because most of the teachers there just thought like I was
> naughty, like a bad kid that didn't do anything. I was just good for
> nothing. But yeah, my dean was the only person that didn't see that.

Ange's mother reiterated the high level of pastoral support given by the school. She recalled how "the whole way with Ange they did everything they could for her…um, giving her less hours at school. Giving her, um, more opportunities to opt out of a class when things weren't good…and changing some of the curriculum and some of the subjects it would sort of make it more accessible for her". This level of flexibility within schools was also identified by practitioners as a critical component to increasing the chances of successful reintegration for some disengaged young people with complex needs, such as "allowing some young people to start later in the day…and recognizing that attendance twice a week for some young people is success".

All practitioners interviewed also observed how supportive schools are, under difficult conditions. One practitioner commented that:

> There's too much of an expectation on schools. I think schools do pastoral
> care really, really well, most schools that I've [worked with]…they really,
> really work hard at engaging their young people. But I don't think school

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[13] Christenson, S.L., Stout, K. & Pohl, A. (2012). *Check and connect: A comprehensive student engagement intervention: Implementing with fidelity.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration. www.checkandconnect.org

[personnel] are supported enough…we expect them to be psychologists, mental health assessors, CYFs workers.

Under challenging conditions another practitioner expressed concern that some schools choose a "punitive approach, because they are under so much pressure from the Ministry…and not really knowing how to deal with this huge problem that they've got sitting in the classroom that they can't manage, and that they can't cope with". This pressure can extend to administrative processes. Another practitioner noted how critical communication was to the process of truancy prevention. This was particularly evident in home–school communication contexts, where transient, low income families often resulted in school records being outdated. He suggested a more systemic review be established for many schools regarding collection and use of home–school communication. Because "if there's no healthy link between home and school then those sorts of things just go by the by".

Some young people also observed a lack of support from the school. One young person who had been bullied so much that he stopped attending school reported that the school needed to *"resolve the bullying and it [attendance] would have been fine".* He concluded in the end it was primarily the support of his friends which helped him get through the bullying and provided him with the main source of support. He also indicated that one on one counselling support would have been useful, *"but they didn't tell me that I could [access that]".*

For some young people, support provided them with the opportunity to transition from school into Alternative Education or training (e.g. course). For one young person (Ange) this led to significant changes to her wellbeing and learning. She recalls how:

> My attendance was so bad…I absolutely hated school. I always had a bad attitude to everything there…it affected home pretty bad because my dad did everything he could for me and I just pushed him away. I pushed everyone away to be honest.

However, after transitioning to an Alternative Education programme the stark contrast was obvious:

> It's just one big family…everybody's so like together, you're not like a single person, pretty much, like it's hard to explain but I do feel understood, especially by my teachers. The [teachers] they're all amazing.

They're all there to support you, they all have your best interests, like at their heart, and they'll just do anything to be there.

The education that Ange received in the Alternative Education programme was transformative to her wellbeing and her sense of self:

I've done things here like I thought I'd never do in my life, like with rock climbing, I was like, I'm not going to be able to climb, you know, to the top, and the first time I did it, I got to the top, and I was so proud of myself, like it just shows you, you can do anything. Like you've just got to believe in yourself and that's what they taught me here, because I used to not believe in myself really.

I'm happier, and I'm more calm and more myself now, like my dad and my's relationship has gotten so much easier now.

Alternative Education played a critical, and at times transformative role in the lives of a number of young people in this study. Parents and practitioners also commented on the need for this service for young people in crisis.

3.2. Dis/engagement Factors Outside of Schooling

3.2.1. Personal Challenges Affecting Engagement

While some young people alluded to personal difficulties outside school, very few were willing to discuss these issues. This may have been due to the way the questions were framed, or because they did not feel comfortable discussing their personal issues with kaiāwhina. However, it was clear that a range of personal issues were impacting upon school attendance and these included physical health conditions and/or mental health issues (including significant trauma, grief and loss, anxiety and depression). Tasha recalled how she was distracted by *"emotional stuff, like outside of school and everything. And that's…yer…a distraction in class…like fights at home, boyfriend troubles, um, yeah".* For others it seemed to be attributed to a lifestyle choice. For example, one young person noted how he would:

…just stay up, and just play *PlayStation* with my friends because they play as well, and so…like sometimes I'd get home and I'd sleep at, like straight away and I'd get up at midnight. So, like and then sometimes I'd go to bed at 12, or sometimes I'd stay up until 2 or something like

> that…sometimes if it was a really boring class, I'd fall asleep…but yeah
> the teachers like never did anything about it, they'd just leave me.

Personal challenges outside of school that contributed to truancy and disengagement were also recognised by the parents and practitioners interviewed. Regarding the mental health of young people, practitioners and parents explained how a history of disengagement in school often led to high levels of anxiety regarding reengagement. As one practitioner observed, *"Many of these cases are complex problems that involve counselling, mental health, and then multiple agency support"*. Another practitioner has observed among many young people *"huge amounts of anxiety, depression, HUGE amount of anxiety. Cutting, feeling isolated, no sense of belonging"*. When reengaging in schooling one parent recalled how difficult it was for her daughter, and how long the process of reengagement took for her. *"I remember the first day [starting in Alternative Education]. She just didn't want to go…she was extremely nervous, you know, I just about didn't get her up the drive"*.

3.2.2. Learning Difficulties

All practitioners and parents, and most young people commented on the way in which their ability to learn, to process information, and to concentrate impacted on their level of dis/engagement in school. One practitioner gave an example which may typify many young people's experiences:

> We've got a thirteen year old boy [with a history of truancy] who's got a
> reading age of 7 years…and the plan is to place him in school, without
> support, so [he] can't read or write, how is that going to make [him] feel.
> So the school is reluctant to take him because he doesn't come with
> support, but to get support he needs to be at school.

All young people spoke of the ways in which they struggled with learning in a regular classroom, and as highlighted in the previous section, most young people signalled the need for help in understanding the curriculum work. This was considered a primary need for them in school.

3.2.3. Whānau/Home Challenges

Like the young people noted, personal barriers primarily included physical and mental health issues, and challenging and complex whānau contexts. Practitioners spoke of a range of whānau issues including: domestic violence; drug and alcohol use; shift work and solo

parenting; whānau illness requiring young people to provide support; bereavement resulting in significant grief and loss for a young person; cultural barriers including English as a second language and understanding school systems and values; transience; mental illness in the whānau; and social isolation. This latter point is illustrated by one practitioner example:

> So [the biggest issue] is breakdown of extended whānau support. So you're really in a community where you're quite alone…So you've got mum who knows she has to work, she is the only provider, she doesn't have support, and so when her son suddenly turns thirteen or fourteen and is bigger than her, she wakes him up at six o'clock but the reality is he doesn't really need to be up until seven thirty…suddenly you know, one day he just didn't feel like [getting up], well who's here to tell him.

All practitioners commented on the extent to which families both value and access education services. They all observed the way in which a significant number of parents had negative experiences in school, and how this in turn shaped their own children's experiences. For example, in some cultures, caring for family members is considered to be of greater value than school attendance and this can create a culture of disengagement. Another barrier to accessing education services may be a lack of effective relationality. Practitioners have observed that there is often not the consistency of personnel to assist with support, advocacy, and understanding. Some families *"remain quite withdrawn and don't know how to be proactive at accessing services…and those services often go in when there's a crisis, and they're out again when the crisis is over. But the problem never actually gets resolved"*. The importance of engaging whānau in culturally responsive ways is discussed in the following section.

4. Findings: Practitioner Insights and Implications for Practice

Regarding practice, the following themes emerged from the interviews with practitioners and whānau: Culturally Relevant Practice, Communicating with Whānau, Relationships with Young People, Collaborative Practice, Professional Development, and Early Intervention. Culturally Relevant Practice refers to both whānau understandings of school systems and values, as well as specific practices relevant to engaging Māori whānau and Pasifika aiga. There is some overlap between with the first three themes: Culturally Relevant Practice, Communicating with Whānau, and Relationships with Young People. The theme, Professional Development, relates to the professional development needs of both in-service and pre-service teachers, as well as Attendance Advisors (kaiāwhina), mentors, etc. who are working with disengaged young people and their whānau. Collaborative Practice emphasises the need to explore more effective and systemic multi-agency approaches to addressing truancy. This theme identified both as a practitioner and a policy issue requiring greater attention. The final theme (Early Intervention) highlights the need to consider a policy and systemic shift in the allocation of resources to identify and address development needs for children at risk of disengagement at a much earlier age.

4.1. Culturally Relevant Practice

One practitioner noted the challenges where there are multiple agencies involved and the needs of the young person and whānau are multi-faceted. One strategy he employed for engaging whānau was to:

> …work consistently with them, and maintain relationships, so one of the key elements of that is, 'how do you maintain a relationship in a very, what can be adversarial environment? What sort of model can you use to actually keep consistently in there and maintain a non-adversarial kind of approach'?

One "very effective model" the practitioner uses is Motivational Interviewing[14], "and the main reason for that is that it is non-adversarial, it's very neutral, and it never engages in

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[14] www.motivationalinterviewing.org

change talk unless the client is beginning to engage in that themselves". He has found this to be the most useful approach to maintaining rapport with whānau. While he commends other interagency and educational approaches such as Rock On[15] and Restorative Practice[16], he argues that these approaches could be developed further to reflect Māori and Pasifika ways of engagement.

The critical importance of being able to engage whānau in culturally appropriate ways was highlighted by one practitioner who shared the example of a Samoan young person non-enrolled. A number of professionals had sought to reengage the young person back into school, but with no success. However, when a Samoan Attendance Advisor (kaiāwhina) was employed to support the family, significant change occurred. The kaiāwhina, along with a Samoan church minister who valued education were able to speak with the family leader, and this resulted in understanding and mutual benefits to the family and to the young person. The Samoan approach and way of engagement was critical to this change process.

4.2. Communicating with Whānau

As highlighted in the previous section, developing and maintaining relationships "is probably the most difficult aspect [of this work]", as one practitioner observed, "because sometimes relationships break down and so 'what are you going to do with that? Are you just going to pretend it's not broken'…as practitioners we actually have to find a way to rebuild that and if we don't then our clients suffer". And this central role of relationality is critical to success in reengaging young people and reducing truancy. While this essential element of the work of practitioners also extends to other relationships (personnel within agencies, schools, etc.), it is no less important when engaging whānau.

One of the key communication roles of practitioners is "getting whānau to understand the education lingo…[it's about] that really clear concise communication but in a language that the whānau can understand and so that brings change because they are informed". This may take different forms, for example, explaining written communications from the school, or bringing in an extended whānau or community member (as in the Samoan case described earlier) to support whānau to understand the issues.

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[15] The *Rock On* programme (Reduce Our Community Kids Offending Now) takes an inter-agency approach toward the prevention of youth offending by targeting truancy.

[16] www.restorativeschools.org.nz

A further point highlighted by practitioners is the belief in, and the valuing of whānau. As one practitioner explained:

> Every family has a value…we're not there to trample the garden they've created for their family. I tell [practitioners] never, ever offer your help to any family…you offer support because by offering support you've saying 'you can do this, you just need someone to get alongside you to get you there'. Always respect, value and respect.

The offer of support is something that parents also identified as critical to helping them reengage their young people back in to school. One of the parents advised other parents to:

> …keep asking for help. Um, because that's one thing I've done right from the word go, I don't care how many agencies are involved, I've got nothing to hide, and I want all the help I can get, because I want the best for my kids, um, all of them, not just the troubled one. And I've had…I've had that whole wrap around system in place for quite some time now…And you feel surrounded by people that are actually trying to help you, and I also think that if you find one that you don't like, ask for a new one, because I've done that too.

When supporting whānau, one practitioner cautioned against *"promising something that you cannot do"*. She considers this to be *"foundational"* to working with whānau and reiterated how important it is to *"always be a person of your word"*. This reliability will in turn help to establish and maintain a trusting relationship which, in turn will help in reengaging young people in school. The criticality of relationships is also a key practice explored in the following section.

4.3. Relationships with Young People

It has already been made very clear from the interviews with young people, that relationships with professionals are critical to engagement in schooling. This is also a key theme that emerged from the practitioner interviews: the centrality of effective relationships to facilitating positive development. Prior to establishing relationships however, practitioners suggest that what we actually believe about young people will determine the nature of the relationship that is established. Thus, relationships that are established with a young person

(or whānau member) will reflect a practitioner's core belief in that young person. As one practitioner explains "*in every person there is goodness*" and every person has value worthy of respect. Where a relationship is established upon this belief then progress may be made more easily. For this practitioner it is a belief in a young person's *"greatness…what they are good at*" that precedes the relationship.

Likewise, another practitioner observed that unless you *"genuinely care about [the young person] as an individual"* progress in developing effective relationships will be hindered. Furthermore, he emphasized how important it is for young people to engage voluntarily in any change work, and this was also noted previously with the reference to the effectiveness of employing *Motivational Interviewing* which is non-coercive. Such a non-coercive approach to engaging young people is likely to meet the need for autonomy and locus of control, and the importance of autonomy for young peoples' development is explored further in the discussion section of this report.

4.4. Collaborative Practice

All practitioners emphasised the need for effective collaborative practice when addressing truancy. Again this linked to the establishment and maintenance of relationships with key personnel within schools and agencies. After several months of frustrating progress with high case loads, one practitioner decided to focus instead on the development of effective relationships with the agencies working around the young people. He began regular meetings with school staff, as well as other key agencies (including social service providers, CYFS, and the police). While this took a great deal of time and some diversion from his case work, he noticed that "*once the relationships were reasonably solid"* he *"started to make progress with the cases".* This approach was particularly important for young people with long term attendance issues who have complex needs. He observed that:

> It's actually a community response where we engage [a range of services], we build supports, we keep communicating around the cases…But this is all about dialogue, it's about relationship, it's not about, um, clinical processes or assessment diagnoses. It's about dialogue and all these parties remaining in some sort of way communicating around the needs of the child and the family and the school.

Where a young person's history of truancy is complex and difficult one practitioner explained that "there's a lot of blame going on around schools, parents, and we have then got to walk into the middle of that and try and resolve it". But he emphasised that "there is no one person who is going to resolve it…it's going to be a collective response…It's not about more resourcing, it's about us working collectively as teams around the [young people] for however long it takes to get a result". This belief in the value of a collaborative approach to reducing truancy has led practitioners to place high value on collaborative models such as Rock On, and as one practitioner noted "that really is a multiagency approach". In one regional context, Rock On and Restorative Practice have been combined and this seems "to be a very effective non punitive approach" because value is placed on the "restoration of relationships".

The development and maintenance of relationships with key personnel was continuously revisited throughout the practitioner interviews. One practitioner implored others working in the field to place the greatest amount of time and energy in this one area of practice. He believed that *"our work [in Attendance Services] is relationship based"*, and he also stressed the inevitability of relationships breaking down because of the difficult, complex and adversarial work. He went on to explain that *"unless we have the skills to rebuild those relationships when they break down then we're probably going to shortfall our clients…so we have to develop the mentality that when a relationship breaks down, 'how are we going to reformulate this relationship? How are we going to work through this?' "*

4.5. Professional Development

There were a number of issues raised around the professional development of practitioners including teachers, kaiāwhina, and mentors, etc. While the ideas were variable they tended to focus again on the ways in which relationships could be developed and maintained, particularly across a range of settings (young people, whānau, school and agencies). Part of the dynamic of student-teacher relationships for example, is the extent to which teachers truly understand the complexities that young people who truant are encountering. As one practitioner explained, *"I could sit here and talk to a group of teachers about a [disengaged] young person, and say 'do you realize what that young person goes through to get to school?' And I could spiel off all the barriers. [Many] teachers still wouldn't get that because they haven't actually lived it, seen it or had experience in it".* There is value, this practitioner

suggested, in creating the opportunity within teacher education for 'face to face' experiential encounters with disengaged young people and their whānau.

Another potential area of development within teacher education (and also for other professionals) is the dissemination of mental wellbeing information. Young people, parents and practitioners in this study all signalled the impact that mental wellbeing has on school dis/engagement, yet there is often misinformation or a lack of information regarding both the nature of mental illness and the sometimes complex process of accessing services. Often it requires the knowledge and skills to "*really get in there and manipulate the system in advocating*". Another component of this is ensuring that mental wellbeing is being developed to help create greater resiliency for young people.

Other areas identified for professional development, include ways to enhance collaborative multi-agency practice, culturally responsive practice, and relating effectively to young people.

4.6. Early Intervention

This theme highlights the need to consider a policy and systemic shift in the allocation of resources to identify and address development needs for children at risk of disengagement at a much earlier age. While the numbers of young people who are truant or non-enrolled is significantly higher at secondary school compared with the early years, all practitioners argued that many of these young people presented with 'disengagement factors' at an early age (for example, learning difficulties, whānau challenges, etc.). All practitioners argued that a greater intensification of effective resourcing at a much earlier age would build resiliency, thus reduce truancy in secondary school. One practitioner spoke frankly about early identification, *"those year one teachers are often identifying the problems, but we do nothing about it because the kid's not throwing a chair across the room, punching the teacher in the guts…"*. He argues that it is not until chronic truancy is established or significant behavioural issues are present, that interventions begin. It's a matter of *"too little, too late"*, another practitioner concludes:

> We're continually working with fourteen and fifteen year olds…it's far too late. We're way down the track and the problems are too complex, and we're just making a mess of it even at that end. [We need to be] intervening at that early stage…because the problem is manageable and

it's workable and it's possibly fixable, but again it still takes a long term approach.

Similarly, another practitioner explained:

I believe we should have a lot of earlier intervention…and it would be having the capacity to work more intensively and to work at a very young age…so any indications of truancy are actually dealt with at a young age. [Because] generally truancy is an indication of…other issues going on in the home and immediately those are being addressed.

[At the moment] we're saying let's [work with them] at fourteen and fifteen, when it's just ingrained patterns…and we're hearing 'this is behavioural', well there had to be some indications at an earlier stage. 'Why are they left until they're almost unmanageable behaviours? How has this person gone through school and he can't read and write and he's thirteen? How can that happen'?

5. Findings: Key Themes and Insights

There were a number of key themes identified through the voices of young people with a history of truancy, as well as whānau and practitioners. Based on these findings a *Model of Youth Development through Education* is suggested in the following section which explores further:

- o Relational factors affecting dis/engagement in schooling (with a focus upon friendships and belonging, relationships with teachers, personal challenges including learning difficulties and/or stress, whānau challenges, and wider school support)

- o Learning factors affecting dis/engagement in schooling (with a focus on getting help with learning/learning difficulties, choice/autonomy, and pedagogical variation in the classroom).

Furthermore, a number of key practitioner insights – and consequential implications for practice – were identified as significant through practitioner interviews (see Figure below), and these will be discussed in the following section. These areas of practice and implications for policy include:

   i.   Culturally relevant practice: with a focus on Māori and Pasifika
  ii.   Effective communication with families/whānau
 iii.   Relating to young people
  iv.   Collaborative, multi-agency practice
   v.   Informed practice, with a focus on understanding the impact of stress on learning, and the importance of mental wellbeing for young people, and
  vi.   Early intervention.

6. Moving Forward

The purpose of this section is to consider the findings of this study in light of existing research and current youth development practice. The possibility of youth development through education will be considered in light of *Positive Youth Development in Aotearoa*[17] (PYDA) as it is this document which forms the basis of current practice for many who work with young people. This research will contribute to the enhancement of this approach by adapting this based on the research findings of this project and existing research; as well as considering possible adaptations for enhancing engagement for young people in education settings. Therefore, this section will explore the themes that emerged from this study by drawing upon existing research and linking the findings where appropriate to the *PYDA*.
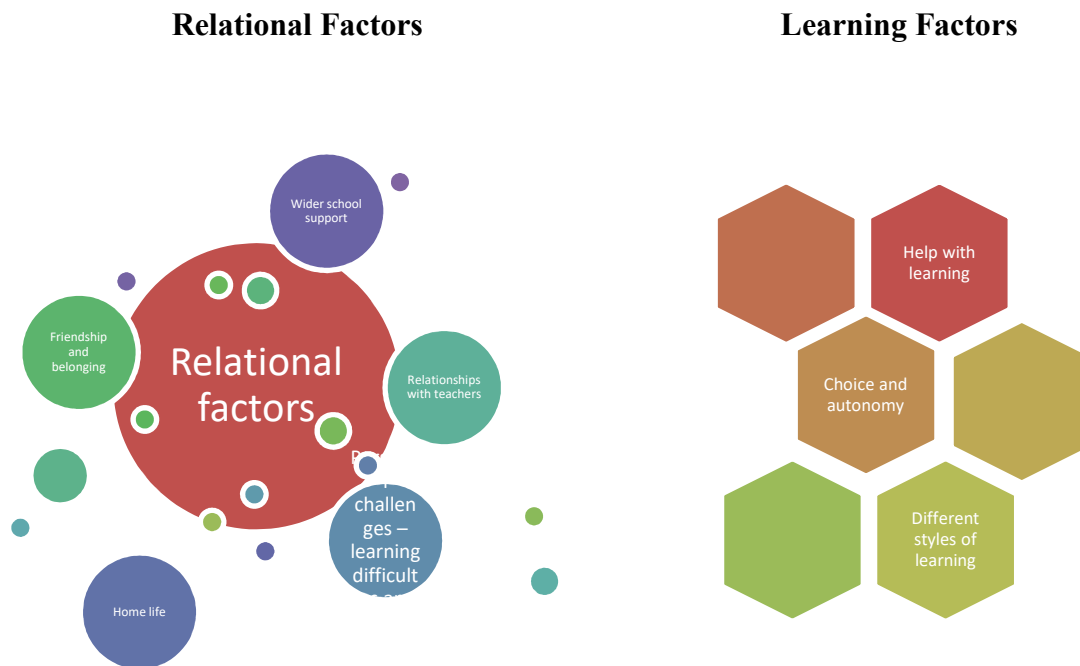
6.1. Model of Youth Development through Education

As indicated earlier, based on the findings of this study a *Model of Youth Development through Education* is suggested which includes the need to consider:

- o Relational factors affecting dis/engagement in schooling (with a focus upon friendships and belonging, relationships with teachers, personal challenges including learning difficulties and/or stress, whānau challenges, and wider school support)

- o Learning factors affecting dis/engagement in schooling (with a focus on getting help with learning/learning difficulties, choice/autonomy, and pedagogical variation in the classroom).

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[17] Wayne Francis Charitable Trust. (2011). *Positive youth development in Aotearoa: Weaving connections – Tuhonohono rangatahi.* www.wfct.org.nz. This resource combines youth development and community development theory, practice and personal stories with the aim of informing good practice in the field.

The figure below represents these themes and demonstrates the way in which they exist side by side and impact upon each other.

Relational Factors   **Learning Factors**
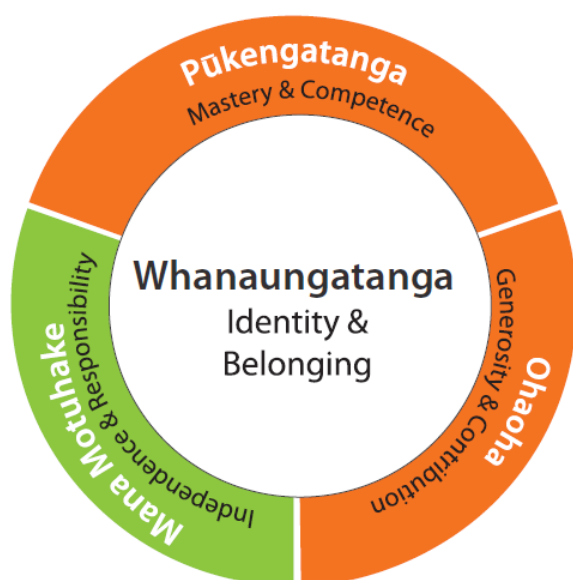

6.1.1. Relational Factors Affecting Dis/engagement

A positive relationship with both friends and teachers was a significant reason for disengagement and reengagement in education for all young people interviewed as part of this study. Where young people had good friendships and felt they belonged within the school, they were more likely to engage. Destructive peer relationships (e.g. through being bullied), or negative teacher relationships (e.g. through not feeling cared for or understood by the teachers) seemed to be the most prevalent factor leading to truancy. Additionally, where young people were unable to access wider school support, they were also more likely to disengage. These three dynamics within the school system will either contribute to or fracture a sense of belonging and connectedness which is critical for a young person's development.

These findings are consistent with research in the field of educational engagement and youth development. For example, a sense of belonging and connectedness through positive relationships is commonly identified within a range of models including *Te Whare Tapa*

Wha[18], *Circle of Courage*[19], and *Intrinsic Motivation*[20], as well as *Bronfenbrenners' Socio-Ecological Perspective*[21]. All models place high value on supporting young people to develop a sense of belonging and connectedness within their own worlds. Bronfenbrenner recognises these worlds as being within school, whānau, peers, and community. This ecological theory is useful as there is an explicit recognition of the need for young people to develop meaningful relationships across a range of settings. Relationships link to belonging, and this is one of four goals of the *Circle of Courage* model (which also includes independence, generosity, and mastery). Interestingly, *Te Ora Hou*[22] adapted this model to fit with their extensive youth work practitioner experience and Māori kaupapa (see Figure below). In the adaptation *Identity and Belonging* was placed as central to development and this may be more consistent with the findings of this study, where young people placed an emphasis on a sense of belonging and connectedness as key to their desire for engagement.

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[18] Durie, M. (1994). *Whaiora: Māori health development*. Oxford University Press.

[19] Brendtro, L., Brokenleg, M. & Van Brockern, S. (2002). *Reclaiming youth at risk: Our hope for our future.* Solution Tree Press, Bloomington.

[20] National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine. (2004). *Engaging schools: Fostering high school students' motivation to learn*. Washington, DC: The National Academic Press.

[21] Bronfenbrenner, U. (1986). Alienation and the four worlds of childhood. *Phi Delta Kappa, 67*, 430-436.

[22] Te Ora Hou. (2009). *Strategic plan and strategic objectives, 2010-2012*. Internal document.

6.1.2. Learning Factors Affecting Dis/engagement

Perhaps the most prevalent learning factor that young people in this study discussed was their need for help by teachers in classroom learning. Most young people spoke at length about the ways in which they became either engaged or disengaged in learning, and the key factor was the extent to which the teacher helped them. However, always preceding this was the young person's need to feel a sense of connectedness with the teacher, and this relates directly to the first theme: *Relational Factors Affecting Dis/Engagement.* Young people recognised that where teachers were positive and funny, they were more likely to engage in learning; and this was followed by the extent to which teachers were helpful or not. This finding is consistent with the *Te Ora Hou* adaptation of *the Circle of Courage* which recognises first and foremost the need for belonging and connectedness, prior to the development of other critical factors such as mastery / skill learning.

While this study does not draw direct correlations between the need for help in learning and learning difficulties, it is possible to surmise that such a correlation does indeed exist. There is now a significant body of literature which indicates that the ability to learn is affected by stress;[23,24,25] and it was clear from all young people, parents and practitioners interviewed in this study that stress (high levels of anxiety) were present where young people were dis/engaged from learning. In addition to stress hindering the ability of one to learn, learning difficulties have also been found to be often present among young people truanting[26,27]. This may be the reason that young people in this study preferred 'practical' subjects such as Art, Music, Technology (including Cooking) and Physical Education; as well as pedagogical variation. These subjects are all less likely to be based upon traditional modes of learning based on text which may be a barrier for those with some forms of learning difficulties. However these subjects are also often either tactile and/or kinaesthetic, thus appealing to

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[23] See for example, *Centre on the Developing Child*, Harvard University: www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

[24] The paper titled, *Persistent Fear and Anxiety can Affect Young Children's Learning and Development* provides helpful insight into the effects of toxic stress on the ability to learn. http://developingchild.harvard.edu/index.php/resources/reports_and_working_papers/working_papers/wp9/

[25] Also useful particularly within a New Zealand context is the resource centre for understanding brain development and learning: www.brainwave.org.nz

[26] Southwell, N. (2006). Truants on truancy: A badness or a valuable indicator of unmet special educational needs. *British Journal of Special Education, 33(2)*, 91-97.

[27] Sutphen, R. D., Ford, J. P., & Flaherty, C. (2010). Truancy interventions: A review of the research literature. *Research on Social Work Practice, 20*(2), 161-171.

young people who prefer these modes of learning. Additionally these subjects may have a therapeutic possibility. This was noted by one of the young people who recalled music lessons where she was able to listen to music *("you can just sit there and put the headphones in...and just go into your little zone")*. For a young person encountering high levels of stress it is not difficult to see the value in this form of engagement.

A recently emerging educational response that may be useful for young people encountering learning difficulties is the *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL) programme. The UDL programme sets diversity at the centre of learning, so that flexible learning and assessment approaches are the starting point, rather than an add-on. The UDL website: www.udlcenter.org explains that "UDL provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone--not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs". Flexible learning options are offered through a range of different ways and this also allows young people the possibility of greater choice.

This notion of choice relates to the final sub-theme that young people identified. The extent to which young people were able to exercise choice – both curriculum and co-curricular – was critical to their level of engagement. Subject choice and more accessibility for lunchtime activities are two examples that young people gave. These desires are also consistent with research which indicates the needs of young people to have a sense of control, autonomy, and independence[28]. Providing greater opportunities for young people to develop these essential tenets within the school environment is difficult, particularly in secondary schools which tend to be hierarchical and teacher-led institutions.

6.2 Implications for Practitioners and for Policy and Resourcing

While *A Model of Youth Development through Education* suggested here may help to address factors impacting upon school dis/engagement for young people, this section focuses upon implications for both practice and policy shifts. After providing a description of the ways in which practitioners may work to facilitate reengagement, this section focuses upon two policy and resourcing issues: the need for greater early intervention, and the need for more effective collaborative multi-agency approaches.
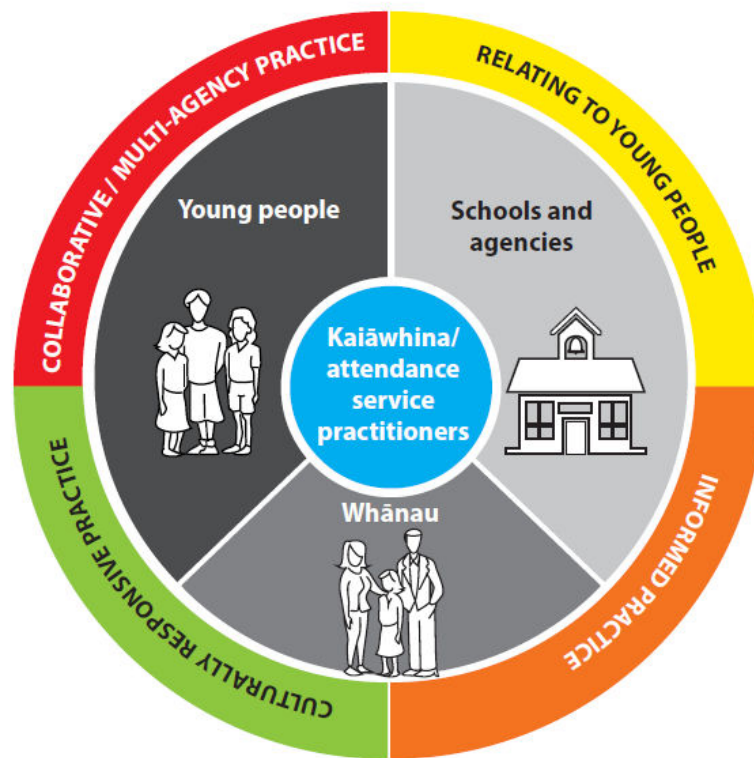
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[28] Brendtro, L., Brokenleg, M. & Van Brockern, S. (2002). *Reclaiming youth at risk: Our hope for our future.* Solution Tree Press, Bloomington. https://reclaimingyouthatrisk.org/

6.2.1. Implications for Practitioners

The findings of this research indicate that there is a need for: (1) professional development for practitioners which lead to increased knowledge and skills relating to the field; (2) culturally responsive practices, particularly for Māori whānau and Pasifika aiga; (3) understanding ways of effectively relating to young people, including a knowledge of youth development; and (4) effective implementation of collaborative models of intervention. While these themes emerged from this research project as well as existing research, like a kete (woven basket) it is difficult to separate them out as different issues. There is significant interrelatedness across the four identified areas. For example professional development needs to include all of the other three areas: cultural responsive practice, relating to young people, and understandings of collaborative practice. Likewise cultural responsive practice is also critical to the effectiveness of relating to young people, whānau, and community partners. Similarly, effective and meaningful relationships are foundational to all areas of effective practice. Nevertheless within each area identified, there are a number of key issues worth highlighting.

The figure below illustrates the way in which the four areas of good practice shape and influence key relationships that kaiāwhina have. These key relationships are with young people, school personnel and related agencies, and whānau and communities.

6.2.2. Professional Development

Based on the findings of this research it is recommended that practitioners undertake significant ongoing professional development around good practice models. Specific areas of professional development work include, but are not limited to the following:

a) Understanding the centrality of effective relationships across all parties, including young people, whānau, and community partners and agencies.

b) Being able to work effectively across a range of cultural contexts, particularly among Māori and Pasifika communities.

c) Developing principles and models of multi-agency collaboration.

d) Developing a greater knowledge of youth development issues, including the impact of stress on learning, and ways of improving wellbeing among young people.

These ideas are explained in the following sections.

6.2.3. Culturally Responsive Practices

In the resource *Te Pikinga ki Runga*[29] MacFarlane (2014) writes that "Understanding how the Treaty impacts on educational theory and praxis is essential if provision is to be culturally responsive to rangatahi Māori and their whānau. The intentions of the *New Zealand Curriculum, Ka Hikitia* and *Specialist Service Standards* make it a natural progression for educators to consider how the Treaty principles might be operationalised within a practice framework" (p.1). Therefore understanding the centrality of the Treaty to any work among rangatahi Māori and their whānau needs to underpin all work that practitioners engage in. To assist with understanding this, MacFarlane has developed a practitioner model of practice: *Te Pikinga ki Runga*. The model was designed specifically for practitioners working with dis/engaged rangatahi Māori and incorporates three operating principles which reflect the intent of the Treaty: partnership – whānau engagement; protection – rangatahi wellbeing; and participation – inclusive ecologies. This model takes seriously the notion of partnership and equal power sharing with whānau, and provides a range of practical suggestions to assist in the development of effective partnerships. Protecting and nurturing rangatahi wellbeing is understood through the development of three domains (hononga, hinengaro, tinana), alongside mana motuhake. These represent relational, psychological and physical dimensions of wellbeing, as well as the notion of self-concept and potential. Like similar models of youth development such as the *Circle of Courage*, rangatahi development can only be fully understood through a holistic framework. Finally, participation through inclusive ecologies is aimed at classroom practice through the enhancement of "curriculum and learning ecology to support presence, participation and learning" (MacFarlane, 2014, p. 2). Implications for teaching practice include ideas identified earlier in this report, such as ensuring young people receive the help that they need in learning, are able to exercise choice/autonomy in their own learning, and are able to access learning opportunities that fit with their learning styles and needs.

The Ministry of Education *Pasifika Education Plan 2013-2017*[30] is cognisant of processes, methodologies, theories and knowledges that are faʻasamoa (the Samoan way), faka-Tonga

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[29] Macfarlane, S. (2014). *Te Pikinga ki Runga: A culturally responsive framework for educators.* Unpublished report. For further information on this model refer to: Macfarlane, S. (2009) Te Pikinga ki Runga: Raising Possibilities. *Set: Research Information for Teachers* (2): 42-50.

[30] Ministry of Education (2013). *Pasifika Education Plan* 2013-2017. Retrieved from: http://pasifika.tki.org.nz/Pasifika-Education-Plan

(the Tongan way), faka-Tokelau (the Tokelau way), faka-Niue (the Niue way), akanoʻanga Kūki ʻĀirani (the Cook Islands way), and vaka-Viti (the Fijian way) for the major Pasifika populations. Recognising that there are diverse cultural contexts is important when considering ways of engaging young people and their aiga. There are two overall areas that require consideration for increasing levels of engagement for Pasifika young people: (1) effective engagement with parents, families and communities; and (2) effective teaching for Pasifika students.

Recent research has found that Pasifika parents and families are more likely to engage where there is a clear reason for them to do so, when they see their children enjoying school and achieving, and where the sharing of knowledge, resources, and practices is reciprocal[31]. Findings in this research also indicate the necessity of engaging with Pasifika parents and families in a way which honours the cultural practices and reflects an understanding of this. In a comprehensive research study[32] it was suggested that:

> (a) parents' understanding of information about their own individual child's learning and achievement, both strengths and weaknesses as well as progress across time, can increase parental impact on motivation and skills; but (b) parents need guidance and advice on both motivational and academic involvement; and (c) parents are keen to receive advice and they have ideas about practices both at home and at school that could contribute. The latter may or may not be effective but they are important ideas that can be the basis of reciprocity – an example is the role and forms of homework" (p. vii).

With regards to the effective teaching of Pasifika students, research is still emergent and required, however there were a number of issues identified in the *Ua Aoina le Manogi o le Lolo: Pasifika Schooling Improvement Research - Final Report* including a range of strategies such as:

a) explicit instruction for both basic knowledge and strategies,
b) high levels of elaborative talk and inquiry,

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[31] http://pasifika.tki.org.nz/Engaging-with-parents

[32] Amituanai-Toloa, M., McNaughton, S., Lai, M.K., Airini. (2010). *Ua Aoina le Manogi o le Lolo: Pasifika Schooling Improvement Research - Final Report*. Retrieved from: http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/pasifika_education/ua-aoina-le-manogi-o-le-lolo-pasifika-schooling-improvement-research-final-report/executive-summary

c) a focus on the language needs including those for vocabulary,
d) well-developed forms of feedback,
e) [the need for teachers to] be clear explain goals and needs for learning, and
f) the twin dimensions of positive relations and incorporating students' resources were
    identified to varying degrees in classrooms (p. viii).

Furthermore, the report goes on to explain that "pasifika pedagogies that are being developed…[which] draw on background knowledge including topics and event knowledge, language patterns and activities…[and] there is the dimension of a strong emotional relationship which, together with the instructional attributes, has elements of being both rigorous and challenging as well as being respectful and empathetic" (p ix). Interestingly, the findings of this study were similar to those found in *Te Kotahitanga* (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003) which explores effective pedagogies for rangatahi Māori.

While the above strategies for engaging Māori and Pasifika young people and families have specific relevancy within the respective communities, it may also be argued that these practices are also likely to be of benefit across a range of cultural contexts (including engaging NZ European young people and families). Therefore, placing the principles and practices as central to all practitioner work may be particularly effective.

6.2.4. Relating to Young People

Engaging young people effectively is multi-faceted and complex. While there is not scope here to expand on this in significant depth, some ideas are highlighted here which reflect findings from this research. Firstly, the centrality of relating to young people will be explored in ways that show genuine care and concern; secondly, engaging with young people in a guided way which recognises their need for agency will be introduced; and finally, the importance of understanding effects of stress and wellbeing on learning will be discussed.

A number of Māori scholars[33] identify *whakawhanaungatanga* (the process of building relationships) as central to the work of engaging rangatahi Māori, and this is also evident for young people from other cultural backgrounds. Without the ability to establish a meaningful connection it is difficult to make any form of progress. Connections are also made,

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[33] See for example: Bishop, R., & Glynn, T. (1999). *Culture counts. Changing power relations in education*. Palmerston North, NZ: Dunmore Press.

MacFarlane[34] suggests, through two other important processes: *manaakitanga* (exercising an ethos of care) and *rangatiratanga* (the right of young people to exercise self-determination). Working within an ethos of care means that young people feel valued and cared for by the practitioner, and self-determination includes the need that young people feel to have a sense of agency and control over their own lives.

Because young people need to have a sense of agency and autonomy over their lives, working with them to determine their readiness to engage in change behaviour – if it is required – may be better served through a guided rather than direct style. As indicated in the findings section, *Motivational Interviewing[35]* may be a useful tool to employ in this process. As an introduction to this approach, Rollnick et al (2010) suggest that practitioners begin by practising three skills needed when using this guided approach to engaging people in behaviour change: (1) ask open ended questions relating to areas that require change; (2) listen so that you are able to really hear what is being said about their experiences and reflect your understanding back to the young person; and (3) inform – which involves asking the young person if you can share your own thoughts about the situation; and then discuss the implications of these ideas.

Often young people may make choices not to attend school in order to protect themselves, and any engagement with behaviour change needs to be aware of this possibility. Young people disengaged from schooling may be experiencing mental health issues, particularly stress and anxiety. Having an understanding of the effects of stress upon learning, and also of mental health issues, as well as ways to mental wellbeing, may help practitioners engage more effectively, as well as having a greater sense of empathy towards a young person disengaged. In a recent report[36] it was noted that:

> for young children who perceive the world as a threatening place, a wide
> range of conditions can trigger anxious behaviours that then impair their
> ability to learn and to interact socially with others. The extent to which

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[34] Macfarlane, A.H. (2007). *Discipline, Democracy and Diversity: working with students with behaviour difficulties.* Wellington: NZCER Press.

[35] Rollnick, S., Butler, C.C., Kinnersley, P., Gregory, J., & Mash, B. (2010). Motivational Interviewing. *BMJ,* 340, 1242-1245

[36] Centre on the Developing Child, (2010). *Persistent fear and anxiety can affect young children's learning and development.* Harvard University. Retrieved from: http://developingchild.harvard.edu/index.php/resources/reports_and_working_papers/working_papers/wp9/

these problems affect physical and mental health is influenced by the frequency of the stressful exposure and/or the emotional intensity of the fear-eliciting event.

The area of the brain most affected by prolonged periods of stress is the prefrontal cortex concerned with regulating thinking, emotions and actions. For young people under high level of stress, the working memory and the ability to attend to tasks and stay focused will be affected. This in turn, may lead to difficulties in the classroom and to disengagement in the schooling process.

Linked to the need for practitioners to have an understanding of mental health conditions is knowledge about ways in which young people's wellbeing may be improved. One recent model being promoted by the Mental Health Foundation is *the Five Ways to Wellbeing*[37] approach. This evidence based approach to improving wellbeing suggests five actions: connect, give, take notice, keep learning, and be active. Understanding the value of these five actions and the way in which they have relevance across the various ecological domains of a young person may be a useful tool for practitioners working with disengaged young people.

6.2.5. Collaborative Models of Intervention

As signalled in the findings section, all practitioners indicated how critical effective working relationships with key community partners are to the likelihood of increasing success in re-engaging young people. The ability to work collaboratively is at least dependent upon two practices: (1) the ability to develop, maintain and repair (if required) relationships with key community partners; and (2) the ability to work with a multi-systemic collaborative model of intervention. Within New Zealand there are limited examples of effective models that operate in a multi-systemic way. Many regions have developed their own locally relevant approach; but these tend to be *ad hoc* and people driven, rather than systematic and policy driven. One example that has been successful in a number of regions is the *Rock On*[38] approach which involves regular meetings with key practitioners and agencies working with disengaged young people. The focus is on supporting young people and their whānau to take action toward improving attendance and engagement in schooling. By working together,

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[37] This approach was developed by the Centre for Wellbeing at the New Economic Foundation. For further information: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/five-ways-to-mental-wellbeing

[38] Rock On (Reduce Our Community Kids Offending Now) is described *Case Studies in Innovative Thinking from New Zealand's Public Sector Repor*t retrieved from: http://www.ssc.govt.nz/sites/all/files/case-study1.pdf

communities are able to address truancy issues more effectively than if agencies and/or individuals worked in individual silos.

In an extensive literature review on interagency collaboration[39] it was noted that effective collaboration takes commitment and time, particularly in the initial stages, while relationships and protocols are established. The report highlighted the centrality of effective relationships as a key factor in the success of interagency approaches. It was also noted that "collaborations that operate within a culture of blame and defensiveness struggle to achieve desired changes" (p.8). This issue was raised by practitioners in this research, and it was observed that a culture of blame may arise particularly where young people's situations are complex and multi-faceted. In order to address the issue of reengaging young people, individual collaboration members need to be cognisant of the need to avoid a blame culture.

6.2.6. Implications for Policy and Resourcing

Two policy and resourcing matters were signalled by practitioners interviewed as part of this research and these include: (1) the need for greater and more systemic collaborative approaches to addressing the needs of young people and their whānau, where truancy and school disengagement is present; and (2) the need for earlier intervention in supporting children identified as at risk of school disengagement. While this first theme is addressed in the previous section, it is also signalled here as a potential policy and resourcing issue.

6.2.7. Need for Early Intervention

All practitioners in this research indicated that there is a need for a more comprehensive shift toward early intervention as a form of truancy prevention. They expressed concern at the number of children and whānau in need of support during the early years, and suggested that this could prevent complex issues of disengagement during adolescence. This link has also been established in research, as is the argument for greater levels of resourcing for early identification and intervention[40]. Early intervention programmes require the ability to operate in multi-systemic ways within a range of different levels. Issues impacting upon programmes include, but are not limited to problems of early identification, the definition of eligibility for

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[39]Atkinson, M. (2007). *Better at Working Together: Interagency Collaboration: Part I, Literature review.* Wellington: High and Complex Needs Unit.

[40] See for example, Conroy, M.A., & Brown, W.H. (2004). Early identification, prevention and early intervention with young children at risk for emotional or behavioural disorders: Issues, trends, and a call for action. *Behavioural Disorders, 29*(3), 224-236.

funding criteria, and the extent to which practices are collaborative. Conroy and Brown (2004) argue that further consideration needs to be given to these issues, as well as practitioner training and proactive early intervention services.

Within New Zealand there are a range of early intervention programmes and service provisions, including *Early Start*[41] and the *Incredible Years Parenting*[42] programmes. The Ministry of Education also offers an *Early Intervention Service*[43] for some children identified with learning difficulties. Each programme has considerable strengths and operates from an evidence based approach. For example, the *Early Start Evaluation Report* released in 2012 indicated that there are benefits to children and their whānau including improved health, education, and parenting outcomes, as well as a reduction in levels of abuse. The report indicated that there is a greater need to engage other family related services to further improve outcomes.

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[41] Early Start Programme: http://www.earlystart.co.nz/ and
http://www.earlystart.co.nz/pdf/evalreport2012.pdf

[42] The Incredible Years: Parents, Teachers and Child Training Series: http://incredibleyears.com/

[43] Ministry of Education Early Intervention Service: http://www.education.govt.nz/early-childhood/teaching-and-learning/learning-tools-and-resources/early-intervention/

7. Summary and Recommendations

This report presents the findings of a research project investigating the factors which lead to dis/engagement in secondary schooling for young people with a history of truancy. Interviews were conducted with young people and whānau, as well as practitioners working in the *Attendance Service*. Findings from this study were discussed in light of current practices and recent research exploring factors of dis/engagement both nationally and internationally.

A Model of Youth Development through Education is suggested here which draws together key themes from the findings of this research, along with existing research in the field. The model suggests that practitioners and schools need to be cognisant of a range of complex issues facing dis/engaged young people including:

- o *Relational factors* affecting dis/engagement in schooling (with a focus upon friendships and belonging, relationships with teachers, personal challenges including learning difficulties and/or stress, whānau challenges, and wider school support)
- o *Learning factors* affecting dis/engagement in schooling (with a focus on getting help with learning/learning difficulties, choice/autonomy, and pedagogical variation in the classroom).

Additionally, the findings of this research indicate that there are a range of implications for practitioner and policy practices including the need to develop more robust approaches which incorporate:

i. Culturally relevant practice, with a focus on Māori and Pasifika
ii. Effective communication with families/whānau
iii. Relating to young people
iv. Collaborative, multi-agency practice
v. Informed practice, with a focus on understanding the impact of stress on learning, and the importance of mental wellbeing for young people, and
vi. Early intervention.

Further research and professional development in these areas is likely to enhance the opportunities for young people to engage in education further. The findings from this research has been published in a resource for practitioners titled: *Positive Youth Development through Education: Addressing Issues of (Dis)Engagement in Aotearoa / New Zealand Schools.*