How the youth sector supports the school re-engagement of vulnerable children in Tasmania

OUTSIDE IN

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SOCIAL ACTION & RESEARCH CENTRE

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> We try to encourage—just continue with what schoolwork you've got and try to stay engaged as much as you can from the outside."

OUTREACH WORKER

Acknowledgements

SARC would like to thank the research participants and their organisations for the time and insightful reflections freely given to this research. The voices of youth workers are central in this report. The bringing together of these voices is a distinct privilege and also a contribution to strengthening awareness of the high value of this community of professionals.

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Executive summary

Engagement in meaningful education is a strongly articulated right and statutory obligation in Australia. Both the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and Australian state-based legislation assert the right of every child to an education. In Tasmania, schooling is a statutory service delivered under legislation currently requiring children to attend school from ages 5-17.

It is clear, however, that even with the comprehensive support of international law and legislation, the right to education is not being fully realised for all Tasmanian children. *Outside in* reports on research which explored barriers to school access and participation for vulnerable children, as these are encountered and responded to by youth workers in the community sector. The research builds on the findings of *Too hard? Highly vulnerable teens in Tasmania* (Robinson 2017a), in which both children and a range of service providers shared concerns about negative school experiences and extended school disengagement. *Outside in* documents a deepened understanding of how youth workers have to 'fight' with schools to secure re-engagement pathways for their young clients (aged 9-14 years) who, at a pivotal point in their development, sit on the edges of the Tasmanian education system or outside it altogether.

The overarching aims of the research were:

- to document the school re-engagement experiences of youth workers in Tasmania;
- to understand the range of barriers to school access and participation that youth workers identify in the lives of their young clients; and
- to consider the systemic supports and changes required to enable vulnerable children's access to and participation in school.

Utilising a narrative inquiry approach, in-depth interviews involving 22 youth workers in community-based youth services were undertaken. Participant recruitment specifically targeted those engaged in delivering statewide programs offering holistic, relationship-based care. These programs – delivered through a range of community service organisations around the state – focus on addressing the spectrum of children's safety, family, accommodation, health and educational needs.

Importantly, this cohort of participants is *comprehensively* drawn from every youth crisis accommodation service in the state, every Targeted Youth Support Service (or Supported Youth Program as this is known in the North of the state), and every Reconnect service in the state. This includes 4 interviews in north-west Tasmania,
6 in northern Tasmania and 9 in southern Tasmania.

The following research questions were explored through these interviews:

1. What key issues with school access and participation do youth service clients (aged 9-14) experience?
2. What types of school re-engagement work do youth services undertake with children (aged 9-14)?
3. What are the enablers of positive outcomes from re-engagement work undertaken by youth services?
4. What are the barriers to positive re-engagement outcomes?
5. What do youth workers need to better support their school re-engagement work with children (aged 9-14)?
6. What supports for children do youth workers believe would impact most positively on their access to and participation in school?

Key research findings

1. CHALLENGES TO SCHOOL ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

Youth workers painted a picture of trauma, adversity, isolation and poverty in the lives of children which put seemingly insurmountable barriers in the way of being at school. Further, they highlighted how *schools themselve*s create barriers to participation for vulnerable children which make learning an opportunity that must be fought for. Workers raised significant issues about children's inability to access schooling, their strikingly poor literacy, their exclusion from school through online offerings, part-time timetables and suspension, and their difficulty in accessing specialist supports for what appeared to be a range of physical health, cognitive and learning issues. Youth workers described trajectories of personal adversity – in which education ideally should intervene – compounded by their clients' very circumscribed interactions with schools. They told a story of unsupported children whose needs are misrecognised in schools and who are often denied meaningful pathways back into school, primarily due to a shortage of appropriate resources.

2. HOW YOUTH WORKERS SUPPORT SCHOOL ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

Youth workers offered detailed accounts of the different ways they attempted to address the barriers to school access and participation experienced by their young clients. Their efforts were split between what they saw as the priority of offering therapeutic and material support to children (and in some cases families) and the time-consuming and often isolated work of undertaking ongoing school-focused advocacy and providing practical support to schools. Workers saw a focus on therapeutic engagement with children – including an emphasis on attachment and self-regulation – as foundational to school re-engagement and to setting a course into life-long learning. They felt such work was compromised by the time they spent trying to identify schools that would accept the re-entry or enrolment of their clients, supporting the implementation of safety plans for children at school, and advocating for access to fuller timetables and specialist learning assessments and assistance. Some felt hopeless about what they saw as the likely limited futures of vulnerable children for whom schooling remains significantly disrupted and incomplete.

3. THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS CHILDREN

Both outreach and refuge workers noted the very specific and intensified barriers to school access and participation for clients who experience unaccompanied homelessness. For children couch-surfing or temporarily accommodated in youth crisis refuges, access to school was reported as an extreme challenge due to geographic displacement from local areas and lack of capacity within refuges to support schooling needs. On top of the trauma surrounding their homelessness and the challenges of being accommodated with up to 7 other distressed children and young people aged 13-20, homeless children in refuges struggled with school enrolment, transport and basics such as uniform, shoes and bags. Further, workers reported limited understanding within schools of the stress and high mobility in homeless children's lives and very little capacity to respond to resulting learning needs.

Recommendations: Towards hope

This report ends with recommendations aimed at strengthening the capacity of schools to transition vulnerable children back into school and hold them there. Such strengthening of end-point service delivery is most likely to emerge from a scaffolded commitment within Department of Education policy, Learning Services operations and individual schools and classrooms. For those children who face the very specific circumstances of unaccompanied homelessness, it is clear that significant barriers to school access and participation also require a targeted response from Communities Tasmania addressing children's need for stable care and supports for school engagement within existing outreach and crisis accommodation services.

RECOMMENDATION ONE: RECOGNISE THE SCHOOL RE-ENGAGEMENT RIGHTS AND NEEDS OF TASMANIAN CHILDREN IN POLICY

The Tasmanian Department of Education should implement a school re-engagement strategy, including capacity to benchmark and monitor progress and outcomes through rigorous data collection from mainstream, alternative and home schooling provisions.

RECOMMENDATION TWO: DEVELOP CENTRALISED SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT COORDINATION SERVICES

Learning Services should develop responsive, publicly visible engagement coordination services to lead advocacy and action on schooling needs and, where needed, facilitate involvement in care planning with allied government and community sector family, child and youth services.

RECOMMENDATION THREE: EMBED RE-ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS IN SCHOOLS

Primary schools, high schools and secondary high schools/colleges must offer embedded, specialist re-engagement programs to support children's re-entry to school following suspension, expulsion and prolonged absence, and offer temporary schooling for children experiencing geographic dislocation.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR: RESPOND TO THE SPECIFIC SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING NEEDS OF UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS CHILDREN

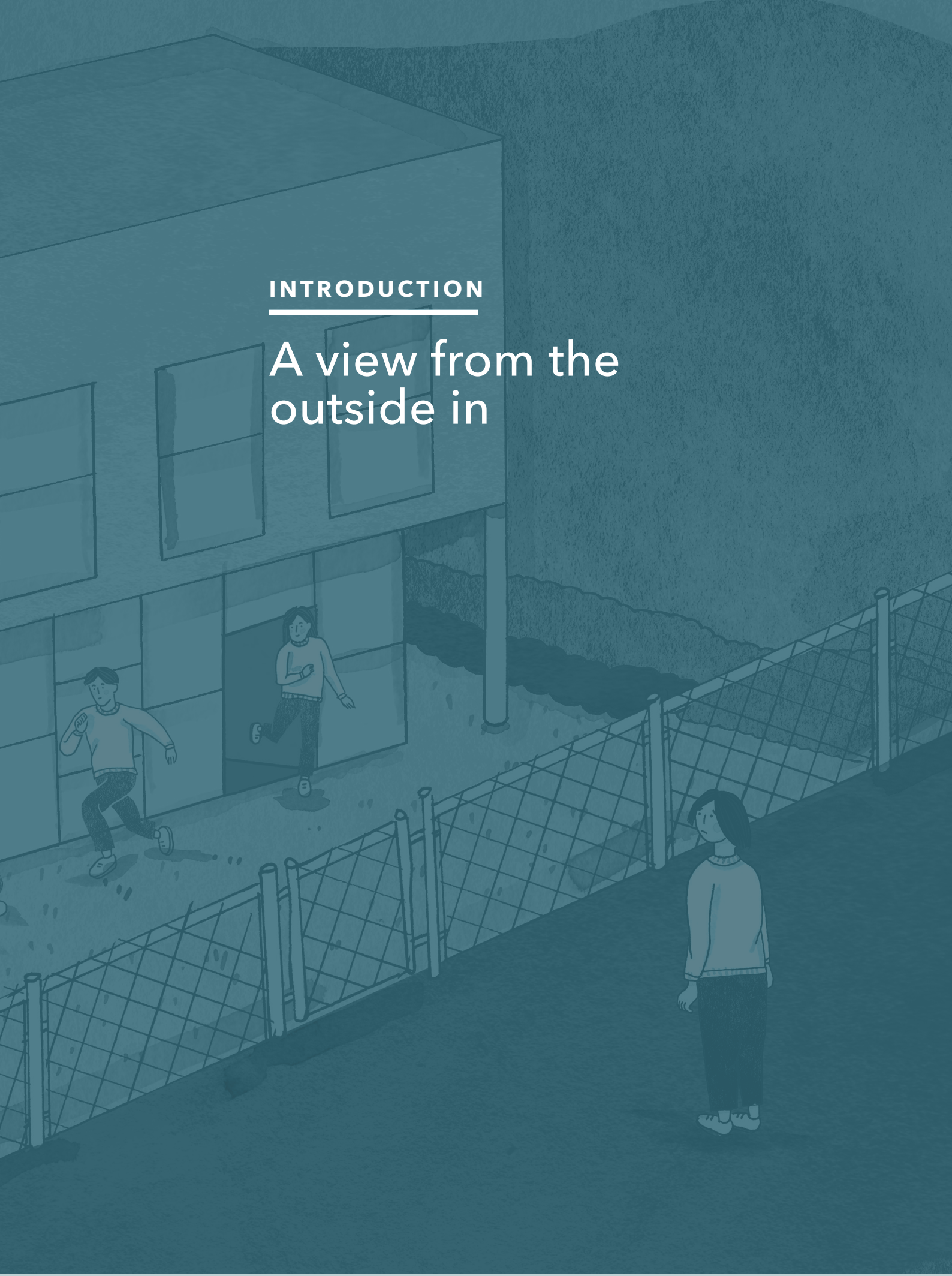
The Tasmanian Department of Education and Communities Tasmania must acknowledge and resource responses to the specific re-engagement and learning needs of unaccompanied homeless children. This should include a commitment by the Department of Education to prioritise engagement support and learning assessment for this cohort and a commitment by Communities Tasmania to address service gaps and design issues, including staffing ratios, within homelessness and outreach services accessed by children.

RECOMMENDATION FIVE: STRENGTHEN THE PRESENCE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN SCHOOLS

This research recommends a significant increase in social work capacity in schools in order to provide continuous, relationship-based care for children; to liaise and collaborate with allied government and community sector supports; and to implement care and safety plans in the school environment.

RECOMMENDATION SIX: RESOURCE THE SYSTEMIC IMPLEMENTATION OF TRAUMA-INFORMED AND POVERTY-INFORMED SERVICE PROVISION IN SCHOOLS

The Tasmanian Department of Education should review how whole school environments can be systemically shaped as sites deeply sensitive to experiences of trauma and poverty. This should include professional development for all teaching and non-teaching school staff; teacher's aide resourcing to support the implementation of responses to the specific learning needs of children impacted by trauma; and trauma-informed and poverty-informed revision of approaches to student behaviour and discipline, in particular suspensions.



INTRODUCTION

A view from the outside in

In 2017, research undertaken in Tasmania clearly illustrated the troubling collision of disadvantage and struggle with school access and participation in the middle years of childhood. *Too hard? Highly vulnerable teens in Tasmania* examined the life stories of older children aged 10-17 years who were known to child protection, police and youth justice and who also experienced unaccompanied homelessness (Robinson 2017a). Child research participants (aged 14-17 years) commonly described leaving both home and school for significant periods beginning at some point between the ages of **10-13 years old**. These were years in which multiple developmental and mental health issues came to a head and children described themselves as both rejected from, and finally able to escape, home and school lives which brought harm and distress.

Specifically, the children understood themselves to be have been 'kicked out' of school and they experienced extended suspensions and exclusions often resulting in multiple terms away during Year 7 and 8 in particular. Many did not believe they would be welcomed back and did not understand the process through which return might be possible. Trauma-related behaviours, long-term experiences of school bullying and periods of unaccompanied homelessness were central in the children's description of their problematic access to and participation in school.

Service providers working in both government and community sectors also consistently identified elements of the school system itself as critical barriers to access and participation. Indeed, many service providers described extreme difficulty in negotiating access to and participation in school for their young clients. This was particularly the case for those who experience prolonged absence from school. They were clear, however, that children readily identified a return to mainstream, full-time school as their top priority, despite the extreme adversity they were also concurrently experiencing, such as having nowhere safe and stable to live or experiencing physical and mental health issues.

Outside in has a specific research focus on understanding the school re-engagement work undertaken with vulnerable children in the youth sector. Through the voices of community-based youth workers, this research investigates the struggles of vulnerable children themselves, exploring both the barriers to school they experience and how youth workers attempt to overcome these. It aims to document, understand and raise the profile of less visible support for school re-engagement which takes part outside of schools and Department of Education services.

In its focus on the experiences of youth workers, *Outside in* captures *one* view into the school struggles of *vulnerable children* and the specialist, relationship-based support work being undertaken with them. The research reflects the lives of a diverse group of children; workers support children who experience high vulnerability – such as those specifically described in *Too hard?* – as well as children who experience a broader spectrum of needs and challenges. This project refers to the clients of youth workers generically as *vulnerable children*, identified as needing or benefitting from specialist support services. As illustrated throughout the report, the research further highlights the needs of a specific cohort of children, also considered in *Too hard?*, who experience homelessness unaccompanied by a parent or guardian.

More broadly, the research seeks to make an innovative sociological contribution to a field dominated by education researchers. There is currently only a small body of research which has addressed the role of the youth sector in school re-engagement in Australia, none of which has Tasmania as a focus. However, indications from other research suggest the pertinence of research on the role of youth support services in school access and participation. Surveys undertaken by youth peaks with their members in Victoria and New South Wales, for example, revealed widespread observation of gaps in education provision and extensive work undertaken in response to the impacts of school suspension and exclusion (YACVIC 2016, p. 9). Further, as McGregor (2017) makes clear, due to their holistic engagement with children and young people, youth workers, as opposed to teachers, are able to offer uniquely powerful insights into the link between disengagement, poverty and socio-economic disadvantage and the resulting supports needed for school access and engagement.

For all of these reasons, this research takes youth workers' experiences and insights as its starting point. It is clear that future research should focus on the voices of vulnerable children themselves in order to more fully understand the experience of working towards re-entry to school from the outside – where the position of 'being outside' refers both to the prolonged and repeated absences from school and to the experience of being a kid who struggles to belong in school environments. It is likewise essential to obtain a view from the range of professionals *inside* school settings into the barriers which preclude the systemic inclusion of vulnerable children.

Research questions and aims

THE OVERARCHING AIMS OF THE PROJECT ARE:

- to document the school re-engagement experience of youth workers in Tasmania;
- to understand the range of barriers to school access and participation that youth workers identify in the lives of their young clients; and
- to consider the systemic supports and changes required to enable vulnerable children's access to and participation in school.

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS FRAMED THE RESEARCH:

1. What key issues with school access and participation do youth service clients (aged 9-14) experience?
2. What types of school re-engagement work do youth services undertake with children (aged 9-14)?
3. What are the enablers of positive outcomes from re-engagement work undertaken by youth services?
4. What are the barriers to positive re-engagement outcomes?
5. What do youth workers need to better support their school re-engagement work with children (aged 9-14)?
6. What supports for children do youth workers believe would impact most positively on their access to and participation in school?

Policy supporting school access and participation

Engagement in meaningful education is a strongly articulated right and statutory obligation in Australia. Both the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (see Australian Human Rights Commission 2017) and Tasmanian legislation assert the *right* of every child to an education. In Tasmania, schooling is a statutory service delivered under legislation requiring children to attend school from ages 5-17. From 2020 it will be compulsory for all young people to attend school or other training programs until they reach 18 years old or complete Year 12 or Certificate III (DoE 2018b).

Implementation of the new *Education Act 2016* began in July 2017 and has included, along with multiple other measures to support school attendance and engagement, the establishment of the Office of the Education Registrar (DoE 2018b). This Office has been charged with responsibility to work collaboratively with students, parents and principals in resolving student non-attendance. The Office can also put in place Compulsory Schooling Orders to clarify expectations for students and parents. Non-compliance with Compulsory Schooling Orders is a criminal offence.

Department of Education (2016a) *Student Engagement Procedures* acknowledge a range of barriers to school engagement, including 'trauma, family breakdown, acting as a care giver in the family, homelessness, poverty, mental health issues, substance abuse and conflict with the law' and make clear that 'school staff are to work pro-actively to ensure that the school culture, structures, programs and processes are inclusive of all students and conducive to effective, engaged learning'. Engagement procedures further clarify that 'schools are also to provide support and strategies to ameliorate the impact of external factors where possible' (DoE 2016a, p. 3).

Following the release of the *2018-2021 Department of Education Strategic Plan, Learners First: Every Learner, Every Day* (DoE 2017), which has a notable emphasis on access, participation, engagement and well-being, the Department of Education has recently launched the *2018-2021 Child and Student Wellbeing Strategy: Safe, Well and Positive Learners* (DoE 2018a). This Wellbeing Strategy begins to articulate the Department of Education's responsibility for the care of children, with a particular focus on those already engaged as learners in Department settings.

More broadly, this research has been undertaken during a time of strengthened policy focus on child, youth and student well-being in Tasmania. Alongside specific policy and practice developments within the Department of Education, the Tasmanian government has initiated three key strategic, cross-agency projects focused on improved responses to vulnerable children and young people. These create a current dynamic context in which to place new research and include the following:

- *Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework* (Tasmanian Government 2018) – a commitment to improved outcomes for Tasmanian children and young people across agreed well-being domains drawn from evidence and models developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Young People (ARACY).
- *Youth at Risk Strategy* (DHHS 2017) – a coordinated review of actions which strengthen the youth at risk service system in Tasmania, in particular by addressing the service gaps experienced by older children aged 10-17 who experience multiple disadvantage.

- *Strong Families – Safe Kids Implementation Plan 2016-2010* (DHHS 2016) – a re-design of the child protection system to develop a broadened and strengthened capacity to enhance the well-being of *all* Tasmanian children, incorporating universal, primary, secondary and specialised responses.

As one of the lead agencies of *Strong Families – Safe Kids* the Department of Education has committed specific investment to supporting student well-being, including the creation of new roles which will focus on providing better responses within schools and also engagement in cross-agency responses to students with complex needs. The Department of Education will also be involved in sharing information with Child Safety Services in order to develop a more comprehensive Child Wellbeing Plan for students experiencing high vulnerability (DHHS n.d.).

The *Youth at Risk Strategy* (DHHS 2017, p. 29) identifies the need for alternative education options as well as re-engagement programs which can support students into mainstream education. Increasing the capacity of student re-engagement programs targeting vulnerable children and young people is a specific action area outlined in the Strategy.

Services supporting school access and participation

In general terms, in Tasmania support for school re-engagement happens through four main areas of service:

- Public schools and programs: The Department of Education offers a tiered continuum of universal to targeted educational provisions (DoE 2016a). Targeted services include the Tasmanian e-school, funded places in Tier 3 re-engagement programs embedded within some mainstream schools, and Tier 4 re-engagement programs located outside of mainstream schools in the community (for example, Radar in Launceston, Space in Devonport and Ed Zone in Hobart). Tier 4 programs are delivered in formal partnership with the state's regional Learning Services.
- Independent registered schools with a re-engagement focus: These offer specialised support and flexible approaches to school engagement. In Tasmania, a number of alternative schools are in operation: St Francis Flexible Learning (Edmund Rice Education Australia) offering Years 7-10 and Capstone College (Fusion Australia Ltd) offering secondary school for children aged 15 or older in Years 9-10.
- Community-based alternative education programs: Save the Children offers two alternative education programs in Tasmania, the Out Teach: Mobile Education Program for 12-18 year olds who have been involved with the youth justice system and Out Teach: Connections to Vocational Training for 16-20 year olds to support a skilled transition into employment.
- Community-based youth services providing general care and support to children and young people through outreach and in Specialist Homelessness Services providing temporary supported accommodation. As part of their therapeutic and relationship-based work addressing the full range of clients' care needs, these services take responsibility for addressing barriers to school access and participation.

This research is specifically focused on exploring the least visible and least supported school re-engagement work: that being undertaken in community-based youth services, *outside* the provision of specialist alternative education schools and programs. As argued above, given the high-risk and mobile lives of many children receiving outreach and supported accommodation services, it is likely that any school re-engagement undertaken for this cohort requires both a specific skill-set and the coordination of multiple services. This research is also specifically focused on school re-engagement work with children in their *middle years*, a cohort less well-served across all re-engagement supports on offer in Tasmania.

Given that learning, including access to and participation in schooling, is recognised as one of six domains constituting child and youth well-being by the Tasmanian Government and also features in the Department of Education Strategic Plan, research exploring the school re-engagement support taking place in community-based youth services is pertinent and points to needed discussion about the interface of such support with Department of Education services. Indeed, collaboration, specifically with non-school partners, has been identified as a crucial area for innovation in developing a culture of education that can support Tasmania's growth and prosperity into the future (Bentley 2017; Cranston et al. 2016).

CHAPTER ONE

Research background and approach

This chapter outlines and justifies the focus of the research on youth workers' experience of supporting the school re-engagement of young clients in their middle years. It discusses national and state-level concern with the school disengagement of children in their middle years and offers a brief overview of the policy and service contexts in Tasmania relevant to school re-engagement.

The research approach is described, and an account of the strengths and limitations of the research approach is offered. Elements of Bourdieu's thinking on social reproduction are introduced as an analytical lens through which to understand how it is that schools themselves may in fact become barriers to the learning and re-engagement of vulnerable children.

Involvement in education, specifically in school environments, has long been posited as essential to the current and future health and well-being of children. For the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Young People (ARACY 2018, p. 35), 'effective learning and educational attainment is fundamental to future opportunities, both financially and socially'. Access to education is also seen as essential for mitigating social inequality and to the creation of successful and flourishing communities. As Lamb and Huo (2017, p. 10) point out, education has very significant national cost-benefit advantages, including increased incomes and tax revenue, reduced use of government-funded health and welfare supports, strengthened families and increased civic engagement.

It is also clear that a significant proportion of Australian children struggle to meet educational attainment benchmarks, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (ARACY 2018, p. 34). More than a quarter of all Australian children have been found to be missing out on educational opportunities and failing to meet learning benchmarks by the time they reach Year 7 (Lamb et al. 2015, p. 18). This translates into lost opportunity and costs for children, young people and the nation; indeed Lamb and Huo (2017, p. 52) argue that 'the failure to adequately prepare Australia's children for lifelong learning and work has a destabilising effect on society'.

Whilst overall the Australian education system performs well in relation to other OECD nations, this averaged success hides the significant differences between advantaged and disadvantaged students. It is clear that Australia does not perform as well as other nations in mitigating the impact of disadvantage and geography on educational attainment. Persistently observed in research is the fact that 'Australia's education system is not working well for the most disadvantaged young people' (Mitchell Institute 2015, p. 1; Cashmore & Townsend 2006).

Worryingly, as argued by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (2018) in their recent submission to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, agreement about the central importance of education in the future of individuals, communities and the nation does not translate into the provision of school re-engagement programs. In their submission, the Brotherhood of St Laurence (2018, p.8) observe that there is no national approach or clear responsibility or accountability for identifying and reconnecting students, and further suggest that in fact outcomes reporting may discourage schools from reaching out to missing and struggling students.

Education in Tasmania and the middle years

Debate about the particular context of low educational attainment in Tasmania has recently focused on early childhood learning, including access to pre-school and kindergarten, and on the unique structure of high school and colleges in Tasmania. Research has shown that underachievement is particularly pronounced in Tasmania from Year 10 onwards (Cranston et al. 2016). The proportion of Tasmanian students attaining a Tasmanian Certificate of Education in 2016 (60%) was substantially lower than the national average of equivalent attainment (76%) (CCYP 2018, p. 55) and research has documented an actual decrease in the retention rate from Year 7/8 to Year 12 (Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre 2017, p. 26; Rodwell 2017, p. 151). As Rowan and Ramsay (2018, p. 292) summarise, 'the majority of Tasmanian public school students do not successfully complete Year 12' and this situation is explained, these researchers suggest, by the fact that Years 11 and 12 have not traditionally been offered at government high-schools.

Because of the very distinct issues of retention and attainment in secondary high school (Years 11 and 12), the educational experiences of those in their middle years appear to be less of a feature in political, policy and community debate in Tasmania. It is clear, however, that the *earlier* transition point between Year 6 and Year 7 and the period of Years 5 to 8 more generally are widely identified as specifically intensified points of both developmental and educational vulnerability (Hopwood, Hay & Dyment 2017; Murray et al. 2004; Rossiter, Clarke & Shields 2018). Indeed, it is agreed that earlier disengagement is one of the strongest predictors of early school leaving (Hancock & Zubrick 2015, p. 23).

During the middle years, self-identity and belonging or non-belonging to school and learning environments are crystallised. The shift from primary to secondary school intersects with significant developmental (cognitive, hormonal and social) upheaval and increased mental health risk (Rossiter, Clarke & Shields 2018, p. 83), and it is here the greatest difference between the attainment of the most and least advantaged students opens up (Lamb et al. 2015, p. 16). It is also the case that the proportion of students not meeting key milestones in this period is higher than in the early years (Lamb et al. 2015, p. 6). In short, the middle years are a period of 'accelerating alienation and disengagement' (Butler et al. 2005, p. 4), with research concluding that,

> If students are not provided with the appropriate social and emotional support at this particular stage in their education, a time when they are seeking support from teachers and fellow peers, they are likely to disengage from school and, in many instances, experience academic difficulties' (Hopwood, Hay & Dyment 2017, p.49).

After the Northern Territory, Tasmania has the highest percentage (30.4%) of students not meeting benchmarks in Year 7 (Lamb et al. 2015, p. 19). Research undertaken in Tasmanian government schools has illustrated that reading attainment is significantly negatively impacted through the primary to secondary school transition, with the biographical timing of a change to an unfamiliar high school setting and associated stress the likely key factor (Hopwood, Hay & Dyment 2017, p. 54). It is also clear that for those who already find school a challenge, the transition to Year 7 in particular is a period in which negative outcomes are much more likely (Hopwood, Hay & Dyment 2017, p. 47).

Thus the message from education research literature is that school disengagement is not just about dropping out after Year 10, and is instead about early and *cumulative* challenges already seen during middle childhood. In short, debate about early school leaving in Tasmania or elsewhere in Australia should not 'stand in' for a needed broader focus on the *process* of school disengagement (Hancock & Zubrick 2015, p. 17). Given that 'it is possible to predict disengagement with a fairly high degree of accuracy in the younger years (8-12)' (Lamb & Dulfer 2008, p. 2), research literature suggests the need for a specific policy and practice focus on the middle years. Most needed is middle years intervention which can address the threats to well-being and achievement that are, in particular, faced by disadvantaged children. This is particularly pertinent in Tasmania which, along with having the most rurally dispersed population of all Australia states, is also the most socio-economically disadvantaged (Cranston et al. 2016, p. 4).

The misrecognition of privilege, poverty and trauma

Understanding the relationship between education access, engagement and disadvantage has long been central to education research, and in particular to the sociology of education. This report is broadly framed by sociological research which historically – and arguably with little outcome – has sought to demonstrate how the structure of contemporary education reproduces social inequalities and remains unable to intervene in generational cycles of social injustice.

It is not within the scope of this research to offer an overview of this very large body of thinking (for recent contributions, see Ayers, Quinn & Stovall 2009; Parker, Gunson & Gale 2017) and nor is this intellectual work mobilised in any comprehensive way for the purposes of this research report. However, as will become clear through the subsequent chapters which offer an analysis of youth workers' understanding of vulnerable children's access and participation in school, the report is influenced by and draws upon the foundational work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in particular his logics of *habitus* and *misrecognition*. These concepts provide a way of making sense of youth workers' accounts of their own school re-engagement practices and of the schooling experiences of the children they work with.

In very broad terms, Bourdieu offers a vision of social reproduction – or the continuance of particular kinds of societies and social hierarchies – that pivots on explaining how ways of being in the world are generationally reproduced through socialisation – or the ways we teach and learn how to be human. *Habitus* is Bourdieu's term for describing our

transmission of social, cultural and physiological ways of being in, and interacting with, the world. Bourdieu argues that in the Western world, the sociocultural competencies and practices of the privileged middle class have come to dominate. This domination is both protected and reproduced through the embedded expectation of these competencies in a range of educational institutions (Bourdieu 1998).

In this context, individual aptitude becomes culturally and historically linked with privilege and with a learned and inherited 'practical sense' for the education system (Bourdieu 1998, p. 22-25). *Misrecognition*, for Bourdieu, is the process through which these links are made invisible; this is a symbolically violent process of 'forgetting' (Bourdieu 2000, p. 142) that social and cultural capital are indeed key to educational attainment. As such schools play a role in maintaining the 'gap between pupils endowed with unequal amounts of cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1998, p. 20) and education is wrongly imagined as a meritocracy or as 'a largely benign and socially neutral process' (James 2015, p. 101).

Thus, through Bourdieu, at the broadest of levels the very idea of 'public' education becomes questionable; the ideas and practices of 'public' education may in fact be revealed as the misrecognised provision of a specific, middle class schooling requiring particular sociocultural competencies and capacities not available to everyone. More specifically, in thinking through the ramifications of Bourdieu's ideas, we are reminded that children are unequally positioned to mobilise the particular habitus or way of being – physically and mentally – that is implicitly and explicitly required to participate in most schools. However, an understanding of this unequal positioning of children is not centrally or fully implemented within the design and delivery of education systems.

The misrecognition of a certain degree of privilege as the basis for accessing and engaging in school in turn arguably leads to more personalised forms of the misrecognition of individual children. As such, any children without this expected competency are instead *misrecognised* as children *who do not belong in school*. In practical terms they may be variously understood, labelled or diagnosed as having problematic, defiant or unsafe behaviour, poor attendance and insufficient concentration, or indeed as cognitively and/or physically disabled, mentally ill or criminal. These children are seen as destined for other, more appropriate institutional environments where they *will* be expected to belong.

For this project, the ideas of *habitus* and *misrecognition* in Bourdieu's work are important logics which can be applied in multiple ways to make sense of the school re-engagement support offered to vulnerable children by youth workers and of youth workers' experiences of the limited understanding and responses to vulnerable children in schools. In particular, this report offers insights into the intimate practical knowledge developed and implemented by youth workers in their struggles to bridge two fundamental experiences of social injustice which negatively impact vulnerable children's access to and engagement in school: poverty and trauma. As will be explored, in their concentrated effort to address the material, psychological and physiological impacts of poverty and trauma on vulnerable children, youth workers attempt to positively *increase* children's sociocultural competencies that they hope will enable school belonging.

Given that the broader institutional context in which children must operate is likely to continue to misrecognise the normalisation of privileged practices in schools and to misrecognise the effects of poverty and trauma as individual problem behaviour, vulnerable children's sense of belonging at school can only ever be fragile. This is a scenario where vulnerable children (and their families) may be required and supported to increase their competency to be able to access schools, but schools may not be required or supported to increase their competency to accommodate and care for children who experience significant disadvantage and distress in their lives.

Through engaging with the perspectives offered by youth workers, this project aims to contribute to broader debates about what supports vulnerable children, their families and schools might require to meet the basics of international law and state-based legislation outlined above, such that *all* children can meaningfully experience what it is to belong in a school environment.

Research approach

This project has a small-scale and descriptive focus. It employs qualitative research, specifically narrative inquiry undertaken through face to face, in-depth interviews. Narrative inquiry emphasises the importance of co-constructing personal stories about lived experience and analysing these in relationship to the broader social, cultural and political environment which informs them (for further discussion, see Clandinin & Rosiek 2007). In practice, this means that interpretive narratives are generated through collaborative talk between research participants and the researcher. These themes are then considered in relationship to broader research, policy and practice literature. As the project involved human subjects, formal ethics approval was sought and granted through the Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Tasmania (Ethics Reference Number: H0017446).

During July and August 2018, 19 interviews involving 22 youth workers in community-based youth services were undertaken. This included 4 interviews in north-west Tasmania, 6 in northern Tasmania, and 9 in southern Tasmania. Workers specifically targeted for involvement were engaged in delivering programs through different community service organisations which offer holistic care addressing the range of children's safety, family, accommodation, health and educational needs. Workers were distinct both in this provision of a holistic or multi-issue support service and in their provision of therapeutic and long-term relational engagement with clients. Workers operated in Specialist Homelessness Services providing crisis supported accommodation (referred to as crisis refuges) for clients aged 13-20 (6 interviews, 9 workers) and through mobile outreach for clients aged 10-17 (13 interviews, 13 workers).

Importantly, this cohort of workers represents experiences drawn *comprehensively* from every youth crisis refuge in the state, from every Targeted Youth Support Service (or Supported Youth Program as this is known in the North of the state), and every Reconnect Service in the state. These are all services which aim to work holistically and therapeutically with clients' needs. Whilst youth crisis refuge workers are often limited in the timeframe of support and accommodation offered (usually 6-8 weeks), the repeat presentation of clients informed their understanding of children's much longer trajectories through vulnerability. A number of workers also co-delivered multiple programs – for example, Targeted Youth Support Service, Reconnect and Kids in Focus (a service supporting children aged 0-18 within families affected by substance abuse) – and were able to work long-term and relationally with children even when their program eligibility varied.

Following a process of informed consent and with the approval of youth workers' organisations, interviews were undertaken in private rooms available at participants' workplaces. One interview was conducted via phone. Of the 19 interviews, 17 were conducted one-to-one with the researcher and the remaining 2 were group interviews involving up to 3 workers in each. These narratives were recorded and transcribed and analysed for key themes. All participants were given a full written transcript of their interview material for their own records and for comment and correction where desired. No participant incentives were offered.

A Reference Group for this project included youth workers from accommodation and outreach services, University of Tasmania education academics with research expertise in the areas of vulnerable children and youth and school re-engagement, and a senior social worker from the Department of Education. This Reference Group was invited to provide advice and feedback at key junctures in the development of the project and contributed actively to the development of recommendations.

Research limitations

As noted above, the specific aim of this research was to document the voices and experiences of youth workers. The project delivers insight into the perspective of one group of professionals engaged in addressing the issues vulnerable children face in accessing and participating in school. As such, insight into the experiences of *other* professionals working on the school engagement issues experienced by this cohort remains a gap for further research to address. Community-based and Department of Education professionals contracted to specifically deliver school engagement support are key; however, it is also important to recognise that these professionals may be less likely to encounter and provide support to highly vulnerable children, especially those *without* Child Protection Orders in place.

It is also the case that this project did not set out to investigate the number of children expected to be experiencing the school access and re-engagement issues outlined in this project. There are a range of difficult methodological issues, including anecdotal observations that official school records are unlikely to accurately record part-time attendance, non-attendance, suspensions and exclusions, as well as the difficulty of tracking the school pathways of children who move from state to independent systems. These difficulties sit alongside the more general challenges of defining 'vulnerable children' and estimating the scale of a cohort which may be unknown to services.

This project offers an important first step in clarifying barriers to school access and participation for vulnerable children and the kind of work that may be needed to remove such barriers. Working through the perspective of youth workers offers a unique vision into the families, homes, lives and school experiences of children. Also unique is the project's documentation of the intimate support youth workers undertake as they endeavour to position children as more able to access and sustain engagement in schooling. Despite its scale, time and resource limitations this project shines light on the daily efforts and frustrations of youth workers determined to ensure their kids are included in the promise of education.

CHAPTER TWO

‘These kids don’t know *how* to go to school’: Challenges to school access and participation

This chapter explores the key challenges to school access and participation youth workers identified in the lives of their young clients. Youth workers painted a picture of trauma, adversity and poverty which put seemingly insurmountable barriers in the way of being at school. Further, they highlighted how *schools themselves* create barriers to participation for vulnerable children which make learning an opportunity that must be fought for.

Youth workers saw trajectories of personal adversity – in which education ideally should intervene – compounded by their clients’ negative and very circumscribed interactions with schools. They told a story of vulnerable, disengaged children whose needs are misrecognised in schools and who are often denied meaningful pathways back into school, primarily due to a shortage of appropriate, targeted resources.

This is the first of two chapters which, drawing intensively on interview material, will explore the experiences of youth workers as they work to support their young clients' access to and participation in school. Youth workers were asked to begin their reflections by providing an overview of the key issues which were likely to impact their clients' access to and participation in school. Workers acknowledged that children's lives were individual and their level of school attendance could range from almost full time to multiple years absent. They also reflected on experiences drawn from both early intervention and crisis contexts. Whilst they expected the individual circumstances of children to vary, they nonetheless painted a very consistent picture of the key issues which – through their painstaking relationship building with clients – they were able to identify at the heart of their struggles.

To make sense of the range of youth workers' observations, this chapter uses the frame of *The Nest*, developed by ARACY to capture the core elements of well-being in children and young people in Australia (ARACY 2014a). ARACY's (2014a, p. 4) overarching vision of well-being is that 'All children are loved and safe, have material basics, are healthy, are learning and participating and have a positive sense of identity culture'. *The Nest* and the principles of child well-being it articulates was generated on the basis of extensive research evidence (for further information, see ARACY 2014b). It forms the basis of a national plan to improve and monitor the well-being of children and young people in Australia.

The vision of ARACY's *Nest*: 'All children are loved and safe, have material basics, are healthy, are learning and participating and have a positive sense of identity culture'

Loved and safe	Being loved and safe embraces positive family relationships and connections with others, along with personal and community safety. Children and youth who are loved and safe are confident, have a strong sense of self-identity, and have high self-esteem. They form secure attachments, have pro-social peer connections and positive adult role models or mentors are present in their life. Children and youth who are loved and safe are resilient: they can withstand life's challenges and respond constructively to setbacks and unanticipated events.
Material basics	Children and youth who have material basics have access to the things they need to live a 'normal life'. They live in adequate and stable housing, with adequate clothing, healthy food and clean water, and the materials they need to participate in education and training pathways.
Healthy	Healthy children and youth have their physical, developmental, psychosocial and mental health needs met. They achieve their optimal developmental trajectories. They have access to services to support their growth and development, and have access to preventative measures to redress any emerging health or developmental concerns.
Learning	Learning is a continuous process throughout life. Children and youth learn through a variety of formal and informal experiences within the classroom and more broadly in their home and in the community. Children and youth who are learning participate in and experience education that enables them to reach their full potential and maximise their life opportunities.
Participating	Participating includes involvement with peers and the community, being able to have a voice and say on matters and, increasingly, access to technology for social connections. In practice, participating means children and youth are supported in expressing their views, their views are taken into account and they are involved in decision-making processes that affect them.
Identity and culture	Having a positive sense of culture and identity is central to the well-being of children and youth, and is particularly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children and youth. This outcome includes having a sense of spiritual wellbeing. It underpins and is fundamental to the other Nest child and youth outcomes areas, with appropriate measures of a sense of culture and identity to be developed.

ARACY 2014a, p. 5

The principles of ARACY's *Nest* have been adopted in the *Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework* (Tasmanian Government 2018) to guide and coordinate the direction of practice and program delivery. Ultimately it will be used to benchmark the success of efforts to improve the well-being of children and young people in Tasmania. Very recently the Department of Education took the step of also utilising *The Nest* as the central vehicle through which to understand and articulate its specific role in improving the well-being of 'learners' in its range of schools, programs and facilities.

The vision of the Tasmanian Department of Education: 'Safe, well and positive learners'

Being loved and safe	Learners have positive relationships and connections with others, feel safe in their learning environments and are resilient to withstand life's challenges.
Having material basics	Learners have materials to access and fully participate in education and the resources to function well and actively engage.
Being healthy	Learners have their physical, developmental, psychosocial and mental health needs met, with resources provided to support their growth.
Learning	Learners are supported to be curious, creative and empowered life-long learners.
Participating	Learners are able to have a voice with their views taken into account and are involved in decision-making that affects them and their learning.
Having a positive sense of culture and identity	Learners have a positive sense of identity and belonging, and are optimistic about their future and success in learning.

DoE 2018a, p. 38

Underpinning the practice of youth workers is a similar shared vision about the hopes for the increased and optimum well-being of all children and young people, including their realisation of life-long learning and positive orientation to the future. However, in their interview reflections on the lives of the vulnerable children that their particular programs and services engage with, youth workers articulated major barriers in all areas of well-being required to access and participate in school. These barriers are presented below in summary. The purpose of this chapter is to describe in more detail how youth workers understand the multiple contexts of children's lives contribute to these poor outcomes.

Youth workers' reality: Barriers faced by clients in accessing and participating in school

ARACY's vision	Tasmanian Department of Education's vision	Youth workers' reality
Being loved and safe	Learners have positive relationships and connections with others, feel safe in their learning environments and are resilient to withstand life's challenges.	Clients experience abandonment, loneliness, are unsupported due to a lack of parenting capacity or absent parents, are impacted by intergenerational trauma and family breakdown and experience community and school environments which are emotionally and physically unsafe.
Having material basics	Learners have materials to access and fully participate in education and the resources to function well and actively engage	Clients experience poverty and homelessness with limited access to food, medication, transport and educational basics including uniform, school bag, lunchbox, study space, computer, internet, pens, paper.
Being healthy	Learners have their physical, developmental, psychosocial and mental health needs met, with resources provided to support their growth.	Clients experience physical, mental and cognitive challenges and illness, an apparent lack of school intervention and extreme difficulty accessing specialist assistance at schools even with advocacy.
Learning	Learners are supported to be curious, creative and empowered life-long learners.	Clients experience intergenerational school disengagement, suspensions, official and unofficial part-time timetables, bullying, significant attendance gaps, extreme divergence from expected academic capacity.
Participating	Learners are able to have a voice with their views taken into account and are involved in decision-making that affects them and their learning.	Clients experience social exclusion, powerlessness and focus on survival only; both clients and their advocates have limited impact in shaping learning.
Having a positive sense of culture and identity	Learners have a positive sense of identity and belonging, and are optimistic about their future and success in learning.	Clients experience non-belonging in family, schools and community; they experience stigmatisation, bullying and labelling at school.

A key focus of the following discussion is on the lack of love and safety in the lives of this cohort of children. Workers emphasised how foundational experiences of neglect and trauma perpetuate a lack of safety, behavioural dysregulation and a struggle to access a raft of basics services, including school, long-term. In short, in their experience, for too many vulnerable children, school – often upheld as a beacon of social hope – is unable to offer the needed sanctuary and pivot for generational change.

As will be discussed in Chapter Three, they nonetheless committed themselves to improving children's access to and participation in school and to working to identify, support and collaborate with other professionals within school environments. Through tracing out their perspectives and school re-engagement efforts, this research reveals the key observation that dedicated, compassionate individuals both outside and inside schools are struggling within a broader system that does not seem to be resourced to offer vulnerable children the recognition they need.

Loved and safe?: Being alone

At the heart of many youth workers' discussions about the key challenges their young clients face in attending school were observations about children's overwhelming isolation in life. The striking aloneness of children had, for some, foundational roots in complex trauma and disrupted attachments with their carer-givers and other family members. Workers witnessed the global impacts of trauma on children's lives, including on their school attendance and ability to participate effectively in learning:

> Refuge worker: They've all got trauma, so you can imagine their ability to engage and learn at school.

> Outreach worker: They are not in a safe space at home, they don't feel empowered enough to go to school or awake enough to go to school.

The power of trauma to upend children's lives was illustrated by one outreach worker as he reflected on recent conversations with a young female client:

> Outreach worker: But you know, spent an hour with her, just talking about how she's going and what some of her issues are at the moment that I can support her with and she just shared with me this whole narrative of trauma and abuse, you know? Her whole life. She's only just learning to escape that and she doesn't know how to function well. She just smokes dope all day, she doesn't go to school, she's enrolled but she hasn't been able to really settle there until probably about 12 and now she's 15. She grew up with significant domestic violence. Her dad was extremely abusive towards mum and she said, 'I'd come home from school and it was go to your room'. Because if you weren't in your room once you got home from school, you were going to get thrown away or clocked. Like you were going to get hit. So it was just safer to go to your room. And she was just like, 'Honestly I can't remember much of my childhood'. Her dad threatened to kill her…From the time she was 12 she's been in and out of refuges…her just trying to survive that was quite difficult.

For this young client, ironically, school became more possible once she was living in youth refuges because although she was attending whilst living at home, the trauma of domestic violence dramatically impacted her capacity to be 'present' – to function or remember. Ultimately, however, her contact with school only ever remained tangential. At the point of meeting with her for the first time, her youth worker found that once again her life was gridlocked with anxiety and she was highly unlikely to return to study.

For workers the many poor outcomes from experiencing a prolonged lack of safety, extreme trauma and adversity – including poor mental and physical health and dysregulated or often unsafe or violent behaviour – were also understood as the outcome of not just their own life experiences but of *inter-generational* trauma. Parents were described in consciously non-judgmental ways as doing their best but falling short, within lifeworlds similarly severely circumscribed by poverty, trauma and dysregulated behaviour. As one worker described:

> Outreach worker: It might be chaotic at home or there might have been a big argument at home. It can also be things like, the parent or caregiver is struggling with things like mental health themselves or experiences of domestic or family violence or alcohol and other drugs. I mean, half the people I have worked with over time can experience all of those at the one time.

> Outreach worker: So sometimes they're living at home. A lot of the younger ones are living at home. But their parents are, it's chaotic. Sometimes there's family violence in their house, sometimes their parents are drug users, and sometimes they just let the kids sit in the bedroom all day, or the kids will walk out the front door and not go to school…And then they'll come home and there's no one to say did you have a good day, like the parents aren't saying did you have a good day at school, have you got any homework to do. A lot of the time there's no food, so a lot of the time the kids don't have the lunches to go, or there's no tea. There's no teatime for these kids, so they might just grab something out of the fridge. It's just so different to our lifestyles, so different.

Ultimately, while facing their own multitude of financial, physical and mental stresses, parents were described as being unable to be present for their children:

> Outreach worker: It can be a lack of the parental or guardian's presence. So, what I mean by that is they might be there, but they're not actually present and attuned to their young person.

> Outreach worker: Those parents really didn't – they didn't have the capacity…All of those people I'm thinking of, they had severe trauma backgrounds, whether from childhood or adulthood…Because of their experience of violence usually.

> Outreach worker: There's no one there to take [children] to school. There's no lunches, there's no food, there's no one to organise a bus for them to get to school or there's no one to push them to go to school. If you don't get up, you just don't get up. Like a lot of these kids don't go to bed until three or four o'clock in the morning.

The end result for children, youth workers argued, is that they develop in households with parents affected by the absence of love and safety in their own lives and largely without the capacity, knowledge or orientation needed to model, teach or support school engagement for their children. Like their children, these parents were more likely to be banned from entering school grounds themselves due to inappropriate or abusive behaviour. Workers also saw them as often being completely unclear about how to advocate for the schooling needs of their children and having had limited school engagement and poor literacy and numeracy skills themselves. As one worker summarised, 'They really come into those [school] settings as children themselves'.

Workers explained that children bore the brunt of both their parents' unsafe, difficult and estranged relationships with school as well as their own:

> Outreach worker: The way the parent connected with the school had an impact on how [the young client] was at school as well…And I think that's often something that is overlooked that the parent doesn't know how best to support the young person at school. And they've had interesting experiences with school and they get triggered and they, for want of a better word, they 'go off' and they lose their temper and they get kicked off the school grounds and they get told don't contact us and the young person is embarrassed and the young person is isolated even further. And the teachers are probably annoyed and may inadvertently take that out on the young person, and we see that quite a bit.

For children still living at home, the stressed, survival mode of parents could mean not only a chaotic, unsupported and potentially unsafe living environment but one in which children were needed at home to provide care for younger siblings, to offer protection to mothers living with domestic violence and to siblings living with physical abuse, and to assist in undertaking household and property tasks that parents lacked capacity to undertake themselves:

> Catherine: What are the barriers for them with school?
> Outreach worker: Just getting up out of bed. Do they have a bed? Were they sleeping on a bed? Probably not. How stiff are they? How hung over are they? Have they been fed? Have they got clothes on? They have got no clean clothes. They stink. There you go. Can they get there? That's a good one. Are they even allowed to leave the house? Is it okay for them to leave? No, maybe not…What if the kid can't leave the house because there are young children and they are unsafe? Dad's been on a bender and he is going to wake up and he is going to be really mad and you want to look after your siblings? Or mum's actually passed out on the couch…and you have to look after the baby and you are nine or ten? There are lots of reasons.

> Catherine: Why aren't kids up at the right time [to go to school]?
> Outreach worker: Well, because of whatever is happening at home. They can't be up all – no one is taking care of that for them. It is their responsibility. They are too young to hold that responsibility, or they have other responsibilities.
> Catherine: Like caring responsibilities?
> Outreach worker: Caring responsibilities for other people in the house, animals on the property…Or someone has already gone to work and that's it. The ride has gone for the day.

As workers described, for parents in survival mode the financial and practical resources, emotional energy and focus are not available to make sending a child to a school a priority or even a possibility:

> Outreach worker: [Mum] was really quite depressed during this time and if he [child] was at home, it made her life easier. So the young children would – they'd sort of look after themselves in the morning, but if he was there through the day he could help with the younger children. So the motivation for her to get him to school, for her life, was not great…

> Outreach worker: So, you start digging into the history further and you look at it all and you see how to some extent mum's experiences and her need to live in the survival space, far overrides sending kids to school or helping them think about a career. They themselves haven't come to that epiphany yet because they are so in survival mode. They are just trying to maintain a property instead of getting kicked out of it. They are trying to have a registered car because of all the debts that they have accumulated over the years through not paying bills…So it is forever just trying to keep going, one foot in front of the other, day by day. There is not room to even consider that the kids potentially need to be going to school and have a better life down the track.

Without a 'support base' of a stable and resourced home life and actively present carers able to coordinate and enable school attendance, for some children school was seen to simply fall outside the parameters of a world strikingly spent without routine and largely inside the home or within a very circumscribed geographical area:

> Outreach worker: I worked with a young 14 year old girl about 18 months ago who wasn't going to school because she would say, 'well why should I go to school when no one else goes anywhere?' And that household was a household where everyone got up in their dressing gowns in the morning and they turned on TV and that was it. For mum, for sisters, everybody. No one worked. No one went to school. So trying to get that girl out of bed for a start and trying to get her to school was impossible. Because she just felt like she was being punished. That no one else has to do what I

> do, why have I got to go to school when no one else does? So school for her was a punishment and it was really super difficult to get her to go to school. We did get her to go back and then we had a referral for little brother only about maybe four or five months again. And she was there and she disengaged from school again.

> Outreach worker: Where you've got kids who have been born into a dysfunctional family, where there's no you have to be anywhere at a certain time or you've got responsibility or, you know, those things we need to make society function. They don't have that in their life and they've never seen it. They don't know what that looks like. I had a young boy who ended up in [a youth refuge] and he's not coming home for his curfew and he hasn't done this and he hasn't done that. And I said [to the refuge worker], 'Mate, this kid has come from a family where there has been no rules and boundaries ever'. He's got no clue about being anywhere on time or responsibility. I said, 'You may as well as be asking this kid to learn how to speak Japanese overnight. He doesn't know what the hell you're talking about mate. He's never experienced any sort of level of function in his life ever'.

This was a pattern that another worker powerfully described as 'generational hopelessness':

> Outreach worker: So their family culture might be one that includes a lower level of education or engagement with education. So, in their mind they are developing that this is what mum and dad did or an uncle or aunty. That's only where I need to get to…So when it comes to young people gradually disengaging from school education, when I come on board, or they completely disengaged, you virtually are unpacking their life history as far back as you can to try and get an understanding of how it became the way it is…It is how their psychological and emotional presence is formed over a period of time…

Family dysfunction, as youth workers described it, not only resulted in immediate practical limits on children's access to school, but a lack of care, safety and positive attachments that could set up much longer-term barriers to school engagement. The generational transmission of trauma and of dysregulated ways of being and living – their 'psychological and emotional presence' as described above – was seen to result in *enduring* rifts between how children learned to operate in the world and the expectations of school settings. As one worker explained in detail:

> Outreach worker: So their biggest challenge is if the brain can't regulate, it can't learn. I think that's probably just a simple statement that most people would agree with. These kids don't regulate. And what that means I, because it might sound like a big word, but regulating is just the ability to sit and listen to take in whatever's being

> said and in some way respond. Yeah, if these kids are doing that, then it doesn't matter where they're at in the classroom. It doesn't even matter what program they're running, whether they have the best youth workers in the world. If these kids are not doing that, then they're not learning. And so, there does come a point…where the teachers are like, this kid is just wasting time.

For children unaccompanied by a parent or guardian and no longer living at home or only intermittently, the issue of feeling and being loved and safe was even more acute and access to school even more difficult and even less of a priority:

> Outreach worker: We get young people that don't have a stable home. Of course they can't attend school if they haven't got a place they're regularly going home to.

In refuge workers' experiences, for children commonly escaping home environments of family violence, breakdown and abuse, safety was seen as the primary concern:

> Refuge worker: Safety is priority number one. If they're not safe then how can they attend school? If they're not safe and they're not stable and they're potentially not sleeping, how can they attend school?

As this same refuge worker also described, whilst they did at times find a degree of parental support for the children in their care, at times they were, along with a safe environment, also providing parental care for children who had been abandoned:

> Refuge worker: So, some parents are still quite engaged and will make sure that they – when the girls come in, they have a uniform and they have their books and all those kind of things. But also, I guess, some of our girls come in from very complex and traumatic households where maybe school wasn't that valued before they left. Or it could be that it's not safe for them to go back and get their uniforms or their backpacks or whatever…Yeah, some parents are just not that interested to be honest, and kind of, hand that parenting role to us.

For children rough sleeping or couch-surfing, the negative impacts on school attendance and coping style were immediate:

> Catherine: For kids who are homeless, what are their main barriers to being able to go school and stay at school?
> Refuge worker: If they are out on the streets, just their basic hygiene. They can't have showers, food can even be difficult to come by as well, so not actually having that mental energy or even physical energy. There's embarrassment again, is a really big one. So you can imagine going to school if you hadn't had a shower for five days, just that kind of stuff. And just not having that support as well to be able to get to school and have someone believe in you, that you can actually do it.

> Outreach worker: Towards the end of last year, [young client] was in a situation of being homeless and couch-surfing. So his school attendance dropped off considerably. Then earlier this year he was squatting…He was with his mum and then getting him to school, he was going to school but getting into class and then just with each day it just got harder and harder and harder, to the point where – yeah. He had a lot of anxiety going on and I think at that point he had missed a lot of school. But walking into that classroom, he just felt plain dumb. He had missed so much that to try and pick up on that was really, really hard. And then not being singled out in front of your peers…And then his mum didn't come home. Just didn't come home so she went on the Friday, and when I arrived on the Monday for a scheduled appointment, that was when I became aware that Mum had not been home all weekend and he didn't actually know where she was.
>
> Catherine: And how old was he at that time?
>
> Outreach worker: Thirteen, 12, 13…He was homeless for two weeks while he bounced between his stepfather and a neighbour, a lady who lived down the road… He was living very much in a survival get-them-before-they-get-you attitude. Very much just getting through day-to-day.

As workers pointed out, in the context of unaccompanied homelessness not only are children having to manage their own survival, but they are also having to somehow cope with the range of factors underpinning their homelessness, including the need to escape unsafe home environments or experiencing abandonment by parents or other carers. Even in cases where children access a crisis refuge, however, there still remain natural limits on children's experiences of both love and safety. As workers argued, in refuges children are ultimately in the care of strangers paid to look after them and they must live with other residents aged 13-20 years old who are also strangers and also experiencing chaos and grief in their lives. Further, the staffing and resourcing of refuges means that workers cannot deliver the intensity of parental care they felt younger clients specifically needed:

> Refuge worker: It's not just a little thing, it's not the running away from home, it's the huger thing that these kids are carrying and that's usually, they don't have anyone in life and their parents don't generally love them sometimes. And that's really hard to see, because it's, you know, they keep reaching out, they're reaching out and they keep getting pushed away, pushed away, and that's sort of – you know, what can you do about that as a worker? Not a lot. Because we're never going to be that person.

> Refuge worker: I mean we try and we create safety in so far as we can but that day to day parenting stuff, we do it as much as we can but we don't have time to do it as intensely as we'd like. We don't have the resources to do it as intensely as we'd like. We've got one worker a day, we can't be transporting every young person to school that has to get to school or going to every appointment. We've only got so much that one person can do in a day.

For youth workers, children's dominant experience of environments in which love and safety may be limited results in multiple practical barriers to accessing school, such as high mobility for those children no longer at home or isolation for those who are. Most significantly, youth workers argued that developing in a context where both love and safety may only be intermittently present creates foundational issues in how children function and relate to themselves and others. This means that even if children are able to attend school, they are much more likely to struggle to maintain the concentration and the safe and regulated behaviour expected of them.

Schools, however, were characterised by youth workers as most commonly another space in which love and safety are rarely experienced by their clients. Indeed, many youth workers suggested that experiences of trauma and abandonment are actively reinforced in school settings, firstly because of the inherently chaotic nature of school settings, and secondly because of a lack of capacity within schools to identify and appropriately respond to traumatised and dysregulated children.

Overwhelmingly, workers suggested, it was the behaviours of children that were identified as unsafe rather than the school environment and school interactions. And yet, as workers explained, schools are not often identified by vulnerable children as safe places – physically and emotionally – as in many ways they replicate the uncontrolled interactions and expectations they experience at home. The clash of classroom crowds and noises with expectations to concentrate, process information and socially interact creates complete overload in the minds and bodies of children already burdened with extremely significant adversity and responsibility. Seen from children's points of view, the classroom and school setting more generally present an overwhelming barrage of emotional and physical threats which frame school as unsafe, just like home.

> Outreach worker: School might not be a safe space for them. If that is the case, why not? Why is school not a safe space? They are not feeling comfortable at school? Why aren't they feeling comfortable at school? They are not at that educational level that they are being asked to do. Why are they there doing it then if they are not at that point? They are feeling ashamed when they are at school so it is not safe, emotionally safe, physically safe.

As opposed to home, however, in the shared or public setting of the school environment the child's inability to self-regulate is thrown into sharp relief:

> Outreach worker: They're getting into fights, disrupt the classroom, threaten teachers…It's sort of, I can't do this, I've got other issues going on, a lot of behavioural issues going on, but the behaviour is in response to usually a lack of safety, lack of stability, lack of a home environment, lack of parenting. That's why you get certain behaviours, so it's sort of, they're just trying to manage themselves basically.

> Outreach worker: It just really is one setting where you can clearly see the inability to self-regulate, the inability to engage with authority figures, the inability to be able to subjugate, you know, that ego stuff when someone's telling you off…You just see all of those things that they cannot do. It's not that it's the specific school, it's just that the demands from a school environment on young people is so high and it's so often inflexible that you see almost – it's almost under a microscope for these sorts of kids – exactly what's going on for them, you know…

For youth workers, explosive behaviour was seen as an expected result of the potent mix of extremely frightening or overwhelming challenges children may face at home, the environmental challenges of school and a lack of capacity to self-regulate:

> Outreach worker: Mostly self-regulation is really key. Yeah, constantly suspended, constantly lashing out, so lashing out at students, lashing out at other teachers, lashing out any anyone, everyone, everyone, breaking stuff, you know…It could be class content, it can be all the home stuff and then you lost it at school. It could be that it's too hard and I don't know what to do and I don't want to be embarrassed. It could be that this kid just really annoys the shit out of me and I don't know how to deal with any of those things. But it's all generally discipline, school discipline stuff, so they've had repeated constant meetings, conversations, suspensions around the way that they interact at school, the ways that they are unsafe and the ways that they are not okay.

Ultimately, as will be discussed further below, on the whole schools were most likely to deal with children's unsafe behaviour through a whole range of measures which reduced their access to the school or otherwise kept them off-site.

In some cases, youth workers realised that this limitation on school access is believed by schools to be in the best interests of the child and for the safety of other students and staff at the school. Generally speaking, however, youth workers also observed what they described as a disturbing lack of capacity, interest and sense of responsibility for understanding what lies behind children's unsafe behaviour and a lack of willingness to investigate all possible options of support that would enable a child to remain safely at school. School disengagement was seen by workers as the most obvious indicator, the 'most visible symptom' of underlying issues. As one worker suggested, instead of ideally being offered *sanctuary* in the context of the extreme adversity they experienced, vulnerable children are expected by schools to take responsibility for their own behaviour and for the barriers this creates:

> Refuge worker: I think a lot of the time you're coming across perceived behavioural issues of these particular kids and that's seen as, well, they're creating a barrier for themselves at school. And I think what's being missed is looking at *why* they have said issues that are needing to be addressed.

Material basics?: Missing out

As already foreshadowed above, poverty and homelessness were seen to throw up deeply significant barriers to children's school access and engagement. Youth workers emphasised that the ability to create the routine needed and expected for social life, including school participation, fundamentally revolves around working life and a presumed stable and sufficient income:

> Outreach worker: As working people, there is a flow to our week. We know on a Sunday afternoon get all your work clothes ready. You might prep your food for the week. You will do your shopping…Those sorts of basic simple things and we know there is an ebb and flow to the week and how we prepare, to be able to function, do what is expected of us and meet those needs…Things that we often just take for granted and just assume that everyone else is doing that. So going home of an evening knowing that – I don't know about you but I know exactly what's for dinner tonight. It is prepped in my fridge…I know when I get home, my son…will have walked the dog, the dinner will be on, he will have had his homework done…he knows when he goes to have a shower there are fresh towels in the cupboard waiting. He know when he gets up tomorrow morning, if he has put a school uniform away, there is one there.

As this worker argued, 'not everyone comes from this world here when we have got the basics'. In youth workers' accounts, the lives of their young clients and their families were simply not characterised by such routines and access to needed resources, due to chaos and impacts of trauma, violence and drug and alcohol use and the major generational struggles of living in poverty and without employment. As one worker commented, 'it's just so different to our lifestyles, so different'.

> Outreach worker: And because a lot of the time some schools are extremely strict on uniforms and then they'll get into trouble for not wearing the right uniforms. Or sometimes there's nowhere for them to wash their clothes and things like that. Sometimes I'll have a young person not go [to school] a number of times and they'll say to me, 'my clothes were dirty. I couldn't go'. There's no washing machine at home to wash his clothes.

> Outreach worker: A lot of my families, because the parents don't have that routine, it's not going – and especially if it is generational, they never saw their parents do it, who saw their parents do it, saw their parents do it.

> Outreach worker: It might be as simple as – I had one child that didn't have a school uniform. And I had another one, it [school non-attendance] was about the fact that Mum didn't have enough food to put in their lunch box and so to go to school without a lunch box creates yet another drama. Someone doesn't have their lunch

> and then someone does a notification [to Child Safety Services], so it's just easier not to go to school…We have either got families who aren't aware of how to shop and how to make their money go, or the money just isn't there…Sometimes it's 'I don't have petrol to put in the car to send my kid to school'. I think it's those simple things, things that we take for granted that our kids have multiple school uniforms and we have a dryer at our disposal and the electricity actually is paid and on. I have rocked up at people's houses and they are sitting in the dark…I have got a family that have got nowhere to do their homework other than sitting on a bed leaning on a knee…

The lack of transport was a common theme in youth workers' discussions of the key barriers to children's school access and participation:

> Outreach worker: Most parents don't drive, if parents drive most parents shouldn't, you know, they're driving without a licence, they're driving unregistered. Most parents say very, very often that they will not pay for petrol.

> Outreach worker: The parents don't have licences. Or if they have had a licence they've lost it due to various reasons. They can't afford a car. There's just not that income in the house.

Access to transport was also described as a particular barrier for those children who lived remotely with elderly grandparents or disabled parents:

> Outreach worker: [Young client] lives with grandparents that are immobile, they don't drive at all and are quite unhealthy. They get a community car, the grandpa will get a community car to do the shopping and stuff in [outer suburbs] every Thursday and that's all they can afford. That's costing them 15 bucks.

In such isolated households, often with very limited income, both telephone services and transport may be absent, making travel to school by children and communication or interaction with the school by carers extremely challenging. Not only does children's access to school become haphazard, but children inappropriately become solely responsible for communicating news of school requirements, events and excursions to carers, a situation that could lead children to miss out on activities or lead carers to lack understanding of, or feel excluded from, what was happening in their child's school life.

For those working with unaccompanied homeless children, the situation described was also bleak. Youth workers emphasised children's total reliance, as dependents, on other individuals, families and support services for access to material basics, and if they could not come across support in whatever form, they went without shelter, food, appropriate clothing and transport.

In terms of attempting to keep up their schooling, it was commonly the lack of access to transport which became the most immediate barrier:

> Outreach worker: The biggest [barrier] is actually just getting there, physically getting there is a real issue. Catching the buses is a real issue and having to work around the ridiculous bus timetables, which are pretty much non-existent in some suburbs. So having to expect a really young kid to walk an hour to get to a bus – who wants to do that? And for other kids, I mean, where can they get money from to get buses to school?

> Outreach worker: The majority of the ones that we pick up are already homeless or couch-surfing. And I think the education system has a real lack of understanding of how much that actually impacts on their attendance, and the fact that they can't actually get to school when they don't actually know where they're staying that night. So I've really struggled with having to get that across to, you know, even some of the school social workers, you think they'd have more of an understanding of how difficult it can be, particularly for kids that are young, who don't have Centrelink, who don't have ID or a Metro card or anything like that.

Aside from the fundamental challenge of how to physically get to school as a dependent child without a carer or income, as this worker points out, the stress of not knowing where they will be staying is ultimately the critical issue and priority for children. Workers did not expect children to be able to maintain their schooling for very long whilst their housing was highly unstable and they were forced to move around different suburbs. Keeping track of the possessions or uniform they may have left home with was nearly impossible whilst couch-surfing and in many cases workers pointed out that children arrived at refuges with very few belongings at all:

> Refuge worker: So we do find a lot of young people do struggle with wanting to go to school because of being pointed out that they're different by not having their outfit and then they can't go to school if they're not wearing school clothes and then they get sent home or they get in trouble or they get given a warning or detention for not wearing it. Some people have it, but had to leave it home because they've just run from abuse.

As workers argued, the distress and crisis surrounding children's homelessness also meant that school attendance may not be a priority or even physically and mentally possible, regardless of whether or not they had access to physical shelter and support. Where it was possible for children to return to school – and where schools had granted children access to return – refuge workers also described varying practical challenges in equipping and enabling children to do so. For children accessing crisis refuges, geography and transport once again presented issues.

As children originate from all over the state, they may end up a long way from their local area school:

> Refuge worker: There are no refuges on the east coast obviously, and this young woman was in a really unsafe situation at home and hitched a lift to Launceston with a stranger, to stay with a stranger she'd met on the internet, and ended up in a really unsafe situation. And then someone, just in passing, told her we [crisis accommodation service] exist and she came here. She was 14…

> Outreach worker: [Transport's] really significant if you're couch-surfing or in a refuge because of course you're gonna have changed area.

> Outreach worker: So that was one of the things that [my client] identified, to be able to get school easier…So he couldn't get to school, his scooter was thrown on a roof somewhere and now he'd moved from Mum, he didn't have any bus money, he didn't have bus tickets or anything or didn't even know which street he was on or how to get to school.

With multiple children to support and staffed with only one worker, it is not possible for refuges to personally transport children to school:

> Refuge worker: We struggle a bit because we've got a one worker model… So that's excluding kids more. So even if the school wants to engage them, who's going to actually pick them up and take them home?

In cases where children had travelled significant distances to refuges, or had been referred to vacant refuge beds in a different region of the state, access to school simply stalled. Even when a child's school and refuge were located in separate but nearby towns – such as Burnie and Devonport – the poor accessibility of public transport remained a barrier. Children were also having to confront new travel routines during a period of acute upheaval and emotional and physical crisis in their lives. Further, as workers explained, along with the lack of access to private transport, the challenges of public transport included the stress of an increased likelihood of unwanted contact with family, peers and other connections they may need to avoid. As one worker explained, for children experiencing vulnerability, buses, for example, were 'a moving vehicle full of potential massive trauma':

> Outreach worker: [Transport's] a huge a problem…A lot of kids there's huge, huge, huge mental health stuff about transport. So being on buses is a big, big trigger. They're constantly hypervigilant, they're constantly fearful…Across the board, the level of anxiety for these kids to get on a bus. You don't know who's going to be on a bus…The drug dealer that mum owes money to?...That person who slagged you off on Facebook?...It's too dangerous. They're so anxious constantly about unpredictable life and then a bus is just like this moving vehicle full of potential massive trauma every time.

> Refuge worker: A 13 year old, generally, at home, might be able to go to school [alone]. But they've lived in that one area, they're going to school along a familiar route with peers that they know. If they're here [crisis refuge], they're completely disconnected from their normal community. They're not necessarily within walking distance of their schools, so geographically they're isolated straight off, just the fact they're here. And then they've got to find new ways of getting to wherever, whilst navigating people that want to hurt you and all the rest. We need to transport them a lot longer than…[someone else] that age [who] comes from a stable environment.

Workers reported distress and difficulty if children needed urgently collecting from school due to accidents or illness when there was no staffing capacity to accommodate this. Further, the practical set-up and ability to provide ongoing material support for education in some crisis accommodation services was described as inadequate:

> Refuge worker: So, we have two beds per room and there is a desk in the room but there's often…it's a teenager's room, so it's often filled with clothes or clutter or whatever else. There's only one computer with internet access in the house, so if we had six girls in the house, only one of them can be using the computer at any one time which can be problematic. We don't have any other educational resources, like even a scientific calculator.

With most refuges unable to provide access to brokerage funds for their clients, some workers reported privately paying for children's school excursions or activities and struggling to source funds for any large costs such as school camp. It was clear, however, that kids inevitably missed out because refuges could not always provide for them:

> Refuge worker: So a lot of times, it's, 'Oh, you need shoes, slippers'. It's either charity or we fund it, personally. Those things are just not there…But all that stuff, why should a child miss out? It's things like school excursions. Why should they miss out?

> Refuge worker: [Accessing material support] can be really hard. Uniforms, unless the school gives them, we don't always have the money. So if [the client] is not linked in with another service…sometimes I can access brokerage, sometimes I can't…When it comes to the core educational, you know, you need a uniform, you need a book, you need a bag…that's the one that's really, really difficult to source. And shoes, a lot of these kids don't have appropriate shoes. They've got one pair and that's it. And they've sort of, you know, got to wear black shoes…that can be really difficult because you don't always have the money.

Healthy?: Floundering

As discussed throughout this chapter so far, workers were very focused on the significant physical, psychological and behavioural effects of growing up with trauma, stress and adversity and the barriers to school these effects triggered. They also described school itself as an environment which contributes to children's poor mental health due to the negative messages children receive about their lack of achievement and poor behaviour. Further, drugs and alcohol – used as a coping mechanism – become unhealthily entwined in children's poor mental and physical states:

> Outreach worker: Well, the barriers are anxiety and depression, which once again have more than likely come from their home situation or their inability to deal with stuff at school because they don't have that good support base. They don't have a good strong base there. So they flounder. So yeah, anxiety and depression, you know, that they develop a drug habit as a coping mechanism…And anxiety comes from the message that they're given about themselves, that they're not capable, you know, stupid, all sorts of things that they're told. Quite often they're getting that message at home and at school.

Workers also raised concerns about their clients' smoking, heavy drinking and diet. They observed that children rarely drink water and often had enormous difficulty eating. In their experience, this was because children were simply not used to eating or only eating highly processed snack food:

> Outreach worker: I mean, did [these kids] have something to eat that day?...Did they drink water? Some kids don't drink water. Can you imagine how tired you'd feel if you just never drink water? And I'm not joking, they'll only drink Coke. And I think, I don't how you guys function. You must be just used to functioning on zero energy because you have these little spurts of sugar high and that's it. That's it and then, you just sink. And then you've got all this sugar on the brain, where it can't regulate. I mean, even if you were at your best, what they're dealing with is really hard.

> Refuge worker: Got to force them to eat. Some of them don't eat. You're like, breakfast! Breakfast!
> Catherine: So what about school lunch?
> Refuge worker: You have to help them pack it. There was one kid that used to have to prepack it…because he wouldn't take food. Trying to get some of them to eat was a big – was difficult, because they're very poor eaters and have sporadic eating patterns and binge. So that can be really hard, feeding them generally.

> Refuge worker: This little kid hasn't got a clue what cauliflower was, didn't know what broccoli was…there was a lot of food that he'd never been exposed to – veggie-wise. And he wouldn't eat certain things he'd never seen…So two minute noodles was it basically, and mashed potato, and food that he'd sort of had access to or sort of junk food, pre-made food. He recognised that, that's okay. But we'd feed him like a home-cooked meal and he'd be like, what is that? And freak out about it.

Workers also raised concerns about the numbers of children they encountered with apparent cognitive and physical disabilities and learning needs that appeared to be undiagnosed or for which children were not receiving support. For many workers, the developmental challenges children faced were firstly made most obvious through their comprehension difficulties:

> Outreach worker: They can't read or write most of them.

> Outreach worker: I think almost every young person I've ever met who's in primary school or grade seven can't read and write. Or if they can, well, it's pretty, it's like… probably grade one, the equivalent of grade one writing. So can't spell, can't – the letters don't quite match up. They're not the same size. They're not straight lines. They go all over the place, it's quite difficult to read…They can't really read.

> Refuge worker: The majority of the time you are dealing with kids with really limited reading and writing…

In workers' experience, these obvious comprehension difficulties were often initial indicators of potentially more complex developmental issues:

> Refuge worker: I had one client who I found was illiterate. He was 14 going on 15 when I first had him…He'd been suspended. A lot of child abuse, neglect, very malnutritioned, half-blind, he never had glasses, he was violent but he was actually picked on, bullied…and he didn't know how to write his ABC, like he's never learned to read or write…And I just thought wow, how does a kid like this get through the system? And I mean, I knew he was on a low level, but like that was incredibly low level. So I did ask for him to have testing outside of just literacy. I did have some questions around, you know, with cooking and processing of things…That wasn't where it should be, I would kind of wonder if there was something underlying or just didn't have the cognitive function he should have at that [age]. I thought, let's rule out does he have a learning disability you know, because things weren't adding up.

Workers consistently reported struggling to have schools support assessment processes for their clients, feeling that the extended wait for assessments coordinated through schools would have significant negative impacts, and were concerned that children's serious health issues were being dismissed as 'bad behaviour':

> Outreach worker: Here in Tasmania we have an appalling way of progressing young people through school…kids are failing but still being put through to the next grade. I feel like with some…say 14 year olds that are cognitively eight and seven. So they are behind the eight ball all the way through and it just builds up, it snowballs. Eventually to the point where they just give up.
> Catherine: So, there is not proactive assessment processes?
> Outreach worker: No, and they take far too long. Just to get a school psychologist to perhaps do a cognitive report…you've got about a six month wait. Externally, if we were to say, right, we can't wait that long trying to reach out to you, you are still waiting a few months the majority of the time, with a cost of about $770.

> Outreach worker: I have seen – I don't like the situations with young people but an inch away from being excluded completely from school due to what they describe as poor behaviour. But in actual fact there was a learning difficulty and there was also a physical disability that was impacting on his ability to be at school to begin with. And when he got to school, his experience was that poor that he'd act out. But they were focusing on his outburst behaviour as opposed to what was actually happening for him. That poor kid – he had involuntary bowel release…ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder]…Low academic cognitively.

> Outreach worker: So we go to this appointment and the principal says – so I say to the principal, 'I would like you to be very careful with this particular client and know that this person's academic capacity is quite low, and this person has had nine schools in eight years. All right? And this person has only lived in houses for six months at a time. So every six months at least, if not every three months has moved.' So put those two things together, this person has not got high academic qualifications here… this person has a Grade 2 numerical capacity, a maybe Grade 5 English reading and writing skills…The principal just said, 'It's not a problem, you just go for two weeks and we will see where you are at. After that we will come and have a discussion'. What does this two weeks look like for this kid who can't do their two times tables? And is supposed to be going into Year 8? Year 8 and doing a history report on World War 2? But this person also can't give you their birth date and can't count the months out. Like that's not fair.

For some workers, it was clear that the lack of proactive support for learning issues was a resource problem. Even with worker advocacy, however, getting children access to assessments was difficult.

> Refuge worker: I actually recently, was involved in some advocacy around a young person to get a cognitive assessment. And other support workers involved with her… fully expected her to test, kind of, below 70, which would mean she would be able to access different resources and different supports. But the school actually wouldn't provide the assessment because it was something to do with the, assessments are valid for two years and this young woman was in Year 9. And if they did that year that means they'd have to do it again in Year 11 for her to finish Year 12 whereas if they waited for next year, it would get all the way to Year 12. And we were trying to say but, what is there for her now? Like, never mind the logistics of she might need to do another test in two years. What are you going to do for her now, knowing that she needs this extra support. And the answer was basically, wait. She's already failed Year 7, 8 and 9… They've [Department of Education] already missed the boat. Like, they recognised in Year 7 that she was behind and they didn't do anything. And now she's in Year 9 and won't do anything. And so, like, how is she going to survive in a college environment if she's not resourced now? And she could be accessing all of these extra supports and like NDIS [National Disability Insurance Scheme] funding potentially, that you can't even look at because you won't do the assessment. So, it's really frustrating.

Disturbingly, this example raises broader questions about how children *without* parental or advocacy support might ever begin to raise their learning issues as a priority in a clearly pressured environment. For those without a team of supporting professional advocates and with absent parents or with disempowered parents impacted by their own mental and physical health, disability and situational complexities – including poor literacy and a lack of understanding of the education system – it seemed that vulnerable children in particular would be left to flounder. Worse still for some workers was the concern that without *rapid* support children's behaviour may escalate, giving rise to conflict with peers and teachers and ultimately making their future at a school even more tenuous.

As another worker observed, even where a child may be granted special supports, problems still arise where these are tied to the school but their recipient is not:

> Outreach worker: The young person had been passed the census date where the support package money had been given to a certain school for this kid and so – and he'd been asked to leave from at least one school and the principals of the schools in his local area knew of him and were saying, 'No, we're not enrolling him'. And the parent had tried. They'd gone to the school. They'd asked to see the principal, they'd tried and the principal had said, 'No. Sorry, we can't. We don't have the right support structure to provide him with what he needs,' which is probably true and I don't blame that principal. Because the kid was going to be high needs. But what the message that was sent to the parent was 'Your kid is so far gone we can't help them'. The message to the kid was, 'The education system doesn't want you'.

Learning?: Being excluded

Whilst workers, particularly those in early intervention services, did describe having contact with some children who were maintaining their schooling full-time, overwhelmingly it appeared most common for workers' clients to have no, little or part-time contact with schools:

> Outreach worker: All our referrals, they're never normally at school and they have massive absences.
> Catherine: Like?
> Outreach worker: Months, sometimes years. Because of their age it's normally, if it's gonna be big years, it's normally just a couple of years. Something normally happens between…they seem to drop off from Grade 4 to 5 onwards, that's where there seems to be a massive drop of their attendance.

> Outreach worker: It's so ridiculous. All these kids are so uneducated…They don't have an education, they can't read or write most of them. It's a joke. It's a joke…You're having massive gaps with these kids. Like it's getting, where before you used to be seeing, you know, coupla months here and there, six months, [now] we're seeing years more regularly. Like because it's building up and up.

> Outreach worker: Sometimes, most times, I would say most times, the client's not attending school, or attending very little school. So for example two years ago I had a boy that was attending three half days; he now attends four full days, after two years of working with him. But that's how long it's taken. Whereas I've had some kids that haven't been to school for up to two years.

> Outreach worker: They are excluded for say violence or abuse or they are part-time enrolled and just not attending or they are full time enrolled and just not attending and [school is] not really caring that they are not attending because they want to keep the funding, or that's our belief.

> Outreach worker: They're either on part-time timetables that they don't want to be on or they're getting suspended and they hate school.

> Refuge worker: Disengaged, or intermittent, very intermittent but very few of them are engaged in school, and that engagement's probably start and stop [since] grade 7. But then, probably, if you went back, it's been happening for some [time]…

> Outreach worker: When I meet them they're generally suspended or in a state of constant – most of them, and this is a weird thing, so most of them in an unofficial agreement between the school and the parent that when the kid's not coping, the kid just goes to school and says, 'I'm done for today,' and they just go home. So they miss huge amounts of school because they can be there for 10 minutes and then they're home and that's across the board a very common thing.

Most striking in youth workers' discussions of school engagement, however, was not the fact that children were not routinely attending school. Arising in workers' narratives was a sense that children had been *severed* from school and were adrift, highly vulnerable, and without capacity or understanding of how it might be possible to return:

> Outreach worker: These kids don't know *how* to go to school, is one of the biggest things. They just don't. I guess if they've been disengaged for a little [while], they don't know, they don't know how to walk through the door. They don't know who they have to see. They just don't know.

> Outreach worker: They'll say, I want to go back to school but I can't. That's usually it, they can't. 'I got suspended and then I've just never gone back', or I don't know, 'I was meant to go to [alternative education program] but there wasn't a meeting set up, I don't know who to contact'. A lot of the time they might not be with their parents, and as we've said, the parents aren't proactive in their lives around education, so they're not following up, you know, who the meetings are with and things like that.

Workers reported a profound and commonly shared perception that their vulnerable clients were not necessarily welcome at school and that to enrol or return a child to school may require a 'fight'. They had a clear sense that 'schools are happy if [the kids] don't turn up'. Quite separately to the intense therapeutic workload they saw was needed to stabilise individual children for a successful fulltime return to school, workers also routinely identified *actually negotiating access to a school* to return to was an expected, major hurdle:

> Outreach worker: I just think the worst part of my work is trying to fight to get a kid back in school and the school say that they're going to and they don't and it's just – that's awful, it's shit and especially when you've got a kid who just wants to be at school.

> Outreach worker: It takes up so much of our role, so much of our role. I used to say all the time that 95% of my role is taken up by education, by trying to fight with education, by picking up the kids, by taking them to school, by figuring all this education stuff out. Imagine if I didn't have to do that. And I'm so focused on education because I know how much it will benefit the young person if they can go somewhere that's safe each day, even that.

> Outreach worker: Some kids will be excluded from the school system. They may not have excluded themselves from the school system, but if they fit into that too hard basket, they'll be excluded, and they can attend half a day, once a week or something, which doesn't...

> Outreach worker: A lot of the time the kids do really, and that's the hardest part, because the kids really want to go back to school. And then you try to follow up, like you try to follow up with schools, you'll suggest a meeting. Sometimes they won't even meet with you.

> Outreach worker: Schools have excluded clients for very long periods of time and have given little or no support to them during this period. Schools have expelled clients where other schools have refused to take them in. These situations see a client get no ongoing support, sense a feeling of rejection and retain a negative attitude to education.

As such, schools themselves became major barriers to school access and participation. Addressing this, particularly for those children who are homeless, required significant time, financial and emotional investment from workers. Indeed a number of workers argued that the majority of their client care time was spent, firstly, negotiating access to school, and secondly, negotiating the terms of this access:

> Outreach worker: It's so disappointing when the kid gets invested…So they say 'Oh well, we just need to see you do really well and then we just need to need you be successful here and then we'll build that up'. But the goal posts change constantly… 'Oh well, you know, you turned up for that thing, so all right, we'll give you, we'll let you be there for half an hour on the Thursday. Well done. So you get up and get dressed and come to school for 30 minutes and leave.' You know? Just fucking awful.

The 'fight' to return to school was seen as particularly difficult for children who during their experience of homelessness lost their one leverage of belonging 'in area':

> Outreach worker: I had one young person, she wanted to go [suburban high school A] and then she was moved to [suburban high school B] and [suburban high school A] said, sorry, you're not in area. And I said well she lives in [area] now – she was couch-surfing. And [suburban high school A] said to me that she has to stay six weeks at that home before we'll enrol her into school. I said, 'But she's living in area'. 'No, we need six weeks'. And so when kids are couch-surfing, another issue they bring up is that they're not in area. So they'll say, 'Whereabouts are they living?'. 'Oh, they're couch-surfing'. 'Well, are they in area?'. No, they don't live anywhere.

Further, given refuge workers have no guardianship authority for the children in their care, if contacting home posed risks or parents or carers were not contactable or refused to sign paperwork, enrolling a child in a new school was extremely difficult when they had travelled out of area or were refused re-entry to their existing school, as well as potentially expensive:

> Refuge worker: To get kids re-enrolled in a new school, so they come from the [regional] area to over here, especially the younger age group, they need that guardian to enrol them and that might not be an ideal situation to get that done. And then there's the finance side of things as well.

> Refuge worker: The school wouldn't have him back but another school would take him…We tried to get him into the school, 'Yep, we'll have him'. So I went back to the other school and said, 'Well, they'll take him in this [other] school, no problems'. [But] he can't go because the grandparents have to sign a release for him and they refused. So 14 weeks this kid didn't go to school…

The problem of lack of guardianship was also identified as an issue for kids attending school; although some workers chose to sign anyway, legally they are not authorised to sign parent/guardian consent forms for school activities:

> Refuge worker: Just that consent stuff. That's the difficult stuff. Especially when you've got a young person and everybody in that class is going on an excursion and we can't sign the thing, so they can't go.

For refuge workers, the struggle to identify a school that would take their clients and to coordinate enrolment or re-entry was pressured because of the limited timeframe of children's crisis accommodation and the multiple challenges of addressing barriers to school access, including coordinating re-entry meetings. Where children were granted re-entry, workers commonly said that this took the form of a strictly conditional welcome back to school in the form of part-time enrolment. This set up a second round of advocacy work focused on trying to increase children's access to school. Indeed for workers, whilst getting children back into school was described as difficult, 'often what's bigger is fighting…to be at school full time'.

For some, part-time enrolment was seen as a hollow gesture that kept children's access to and connection to school in constant abeyance:

> Outreach worker: So his timetable is, he can go from nine to ten, I think it's to ten and then I can pick him up after recess at ten thirty. He can go to English. That's it. English…He gets special funding at school because he's on the lower IQ…He doesn't have a clue what's happening in English. He just sits there…He's like, why should I get up out of bed for 45 minutes [of school]? And I'm like, it's a fair call. So he really likes Art. I said to them, would you be willing to put in an Art class? So after some really, about ten phone calls and emails, they decided to put in Art class on the Tuesday and Thursday. But Tuesdays and Thursdays they've taken English away to put in Art. He's 14 years old.
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> …
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> [Continued] Sometimes it is quite an easy, I say easy transition back in, but then it looks like going to English for 45 minutes a day. So that's what an easy transition looks like. It's not a full timetable. So in one sense it's easy to get them sent back into the school to do that, but the timetable is just atrocious, it's just atrocious.

Whilst youth workers did acknowledge that part-time enrolment could also be offered to support a manageable or safe return to school, they also observed that part-time enrolment only created more difficulties for children, especially for those who did not necessarily have anywhere safe to be or any care arrangements whilst they weren't attending school. Further, workers argued that part-time enrolment itself, and in particular the manipulation of part-time enrolment – for example to ensure children were not on school grounds during play periods or to further restrict school access where children had not met participation expectations initially set – created a strong sense of non-belonging for children. And yet from their perspective, kids are desperate to belong to school, to be normal, so much so, as one worker described, that she'd even had clients who when not attending school had still worn their uniform in public:

> Outreach worker: So often what happens is these kids get suspended repeatedly [but] most kids, as much as they've had terrible, terrible experiences in school, they want to be at school full-time like a normal kid. I would assume, as a kid, if someone said to me, 'You can turn up to school two days a week for an hour a day and then no one's going to annoy you ever again,' I would be, like, yeah, fine, see ya! But kids don't want that. Kids hate it. They hate it. I can't believe the number of clients that I've had who've been put on these ridiculously limited timetables. They just want to be normal, they just want to be with everyone else, they just want to turn up every day. So I've got kids who if they go on a bus anywhere, so if they're not attending anywhere, they wear a school uniform so they look like they go to a school, yeah… The number of kids who just want to be back at full time school and the number of schools that are just so adverse is astonishing, it's really sad.

Similar to the use of official and unofficial part-time enrolment, at times schools were perceived to use physical and online re-entry or alternative education programs and e-school as options for keeping vulnerable children at arm's length rather than for providing thorough, well-monitored education provision:

> Outreach worker: [Program A] is a re-entry program back into mainstream school, so when things aren't going really well in mainstream school, they'll go to [Program A]. I've worked with lots of young people, and lots of young people say they want to go back to mainstream school. It never happens, it just doesn't.
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> Catherine: What's the block?
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> Outreach worker: Schools. They won't have them back.
>
> Catherine: Right.
>
> Outreach worker: They just won't. Schools won't take them back. They'll go, 'Oh, they're at [Program A], we don't have to worry about it anymore…If they say no, that's where it finishes. And then because the kids are waiting too long, something happens. They might have an outburst or they might get angry or they might get a charge. And then the schools go, 'See, I told you! This is why they're not coming back!

Schools' referrals of children to online learning was particularly criticised by workers as deeply insensitive to children's clear relational needs and their adverse, absent, or unsafe home contexts:

> Outreach worker: So, one response was you're not allowed at school anymore, you're too unsafe. We will refer you to e-learning. We can do some sort of home schooling when you don't have a home…That's not going to work!

> Outreach worker: We have e-learning and home school…You can't do home schooling or learning with kids who aren't supported at home. It just doesn't work.

> Outreach worker: Let's all just be honest that these kids will never do [school] online and that is an absolute bullshit lie that we're telling ourselves to look like we've done something. We're not, we just reinforce with that kid here is one more area that you've failed…There's no way those kids are going to do that work, there's no way…They don't have contacts, they don't have credit, they don't have Wi-Fi, they don't have a space, they don't have time, they don't have anyone who value doing that. They have people in their house who go, 'You fucking nerd, look at you fucking trying to do all your fucking work, what's fucking wrong with you, you gay?' You know, that's the world these kids live in…I've had one girl who was doing [school online] – they gave her a computer, a laptop, and her mum stole it and flogged it, you know, would have got $10 for it.

> Outreach worker: These [online] programs can be implemented as an alternative by the school where the school assumes that the parents or carers are going to monitor progress. Most parents/carers don't as they cannot support the child due to their own low educational ability or don't have the capacity to set structured routines in the home. At times parents and carers simply do not care. And that's the reality…They're not at school because they're not capable, and then you throw them on a computer at home…And then [Department of Education] claim, 'Look at the alternative that we've given this child to education'. But look at the environment you've put that alternative into. They're not doing it, they're not performing. And they're not learning.

Participating?: Just surviving

For youth workers, one of the most distressing aspects of witnessing extreme adversity in children's lives was the way this made children voiceless, isolated and only able to focus on everyday essentials. As one worker summarised, 'these kids, essentially, have just checked out of life and they're just surviving':

> Outreach worker: I guess, when I talk to someone who doesn't know anything about youth work or doesn't know anything about what my job would be, I explain that I support young people who have a trauma history and I support young people that are highly disengaged from community, education, family and often society. So, they are just highly disengaged from actively, what we would think is maybe actively pursuing some sort of a pathway in life, which is going to bring some sort of happiness, fulfilment or some sort of buy-in into what life's about. So these kids essentially, have just checked out of life and they're just surviving.

What was also distressing was the lack of capacity refuge workers in particular faced – due to the common one-worker staffing model – to support children's participation in a range of age-appropriate activities, including school and related activities:

> Refuge worker: A lot of kids that semi-engaged in school, then also disengage because there's no one to take them to sport, no one to do the extracurricular stuff. So if you want to be involved in something, a school play, it might be after school, you've got to be able to get home. So not having the support to go in and do that...

Here again the practicalities of transport and school access were constant barriers, but workers also saw homeless children as too often lacking the intimate interactions around school and other activities which might inform, support and further encourage school and community participation. For both the homeless and those at home without fully-present carers, sporadic school attendance and little access to activities meant vulnerable children had few people with whom to share or discuss experiences, problem-solve or seek advice and information. In short, not only were they largely voiceless, they had few people to listen to them.

Identity and culture?: Being 'scum' and 'pov'

For youth workers, there was a very powerful link between vulnerable children's identity formation and engagement in school. Many workers identified shame at the heart of how children understood themselves and at the heart of how others interacted with them. For some, this was about the impacts of a difficult home life, including the breakdown of their relationships with family and school:

> Outreach worker: I think the home life definitely impacts on their self-esteem and their confidence and their sense of acceptance and belonging.

> Outreach worker: If you're continually given bad messages about yourself, that's who I am. So you know, and that feeds into that whole anxiety and depression and we were talking earlier on about…developing a healthy identity, that these poor kids have got an unhealthy identity.

For others, detrimental self-concepts influenced by negative personal relationships at home and school were further overlaid by a more generalised and stigmatised 'class' identity: 'we're just scum'. This 'scum' identity was laden with poor self-worth and intrinsically connected to intergenerational poverty. It was both an ostracising label and a self-identity reinforced by children themselves and also, some workers argued, by the attitudes of some teachers:

> Refuge worker: These kids think pretty low of themselves. A lot of these kids call themselves scum, like 'we're just scum'. It's a very common term amongst them…And it's because you know, that whole bogan welfare…kind of 'class'…Nearly all the kids from that sort of background just have such low self-esteem, so when people do treat them like that, it's very…it's normal…and they think well, that's what everyone else thinks of me, that's what I am.

> Refuge worker: Sometimes I think kids from a certain background, particular intergenerational welfare background, get written off early, and teachers go, 'Well, that's just so and so. He'll drop out two years from now or go have a baby soon and you know, like it's sort of expected that that is their trajectory…

According to workers, peers too had a very significant impact on identity-formation and this could generate another difficulty for children from low-income families. Being stigmatised and bullied at school because of experiencing poverty was an issue reported by a number of workers. And as suggested below, the stigma of poverty – of being labelled 'pov' – is yet another 'gut-wrenching' barrier to school-belonging, especially as children mature and become more self-aware:

> Outreach worker: I think as they're getting a little bit older, this is the start of where they're realising, I've got dirty clothes, I'm not going to school. So this is Grade 4, 5 probably when where they're younger they probably, they're not seeing that. So the teasing's starting, and there's just no clothes, there's no school lunches. Everyone else is buying their lunches. There's no money.

> Outreach worker: If mum and dad are struggling financially, the children or the young people are going to pick up on that as well. What could be the biggest effect in that space I believe is the social peer impact on young people…It is so more important to them these days. Just to fit in and not be teased or bullied. They need to wear good shoes…and brand name clothes and backpacks. And if the money is just not there, well, they end up sometimes having to have a target on their back at school. Again, why would a young person want to go to school if they are just going to be bullied or picked on? Made to feel like crap? Young people walk around calling them 'pov'. Poverty, you're poor, your family is poor. That's very gut-wrenching for a lot of young people.

Conclusion: 'Somewhere, adults have to play the adult role'

This chapter has presented an extended overview of the key barriers to school access and participation that youth workers encounter in the lives of the young clients they work with. It bears witness to the experiences of youth workers and, through them, to those of often very vulnerable children. Whilst repetitive at times, even monotonous, this collection of narratives only reflects the relentless nature of extreme hardship and its repeated effects that promulgate in multiple life domains.

Youth workers clearly identified a wide range of supports needed in multiple dimensions of children's lives in order to make possible access to and ongoing participation in school. In their family environments, during unaccompanied homelessness and in their schools the key elements of wellbeing which interlock to make learning possible were described by workers as non-existent at worst or fragile and intermittent at best.

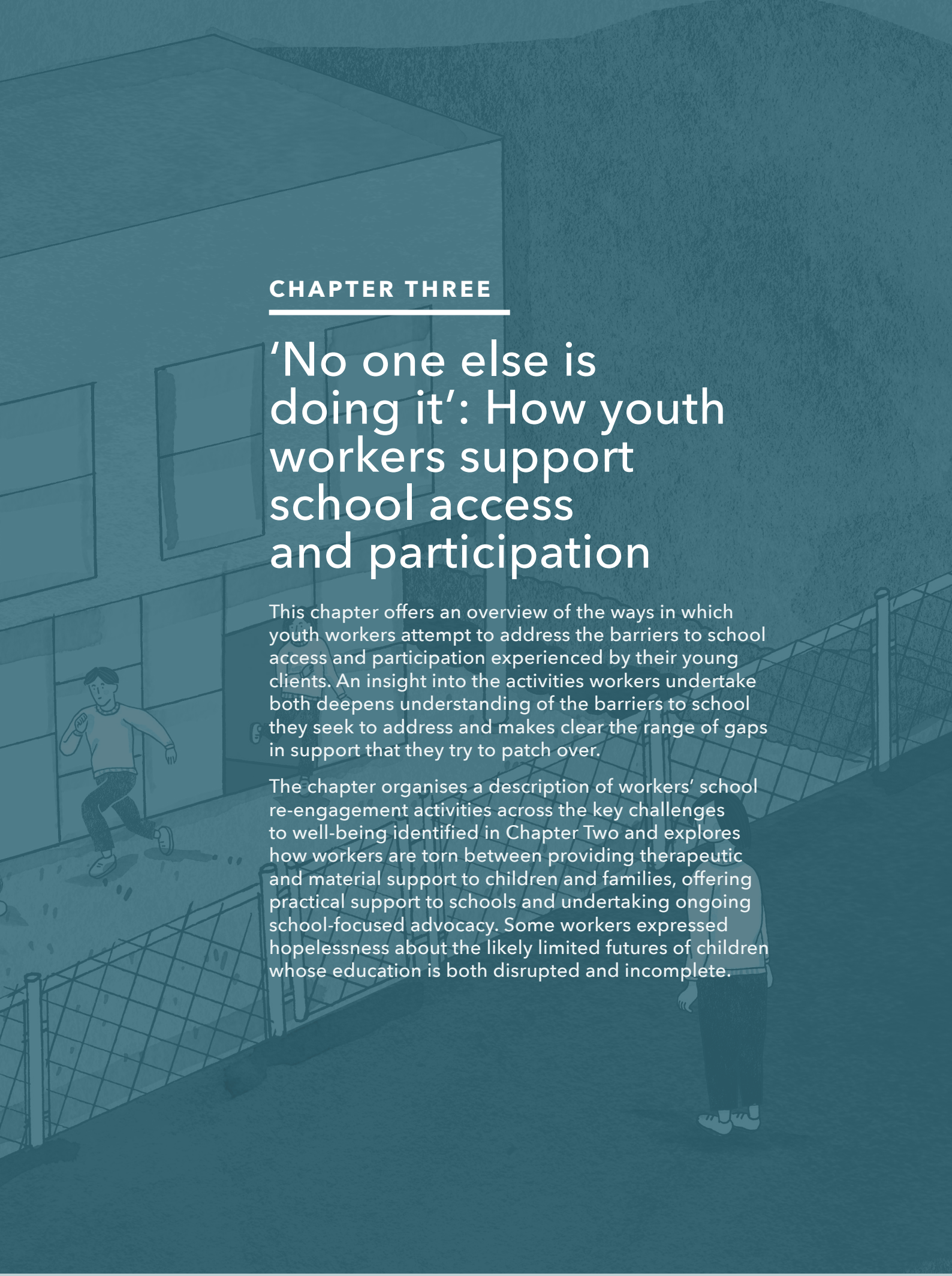
The framing observation of this chapter, that 'these kids don't know *how* to go to school', points to both the fundamental challenges of self-regulation and navigating the school system that children face. In both these challenges, children appear – at the time they present to youth workers – as overwhelmingly alone, aware that the collapse of school 'is a constant shrill reminder of all the things that are wrong', but without comprehension of what path, if any, lies to healing and re-engagement.

Regardless of what long-suffered frustrations schools may have already had with children or what school supports may have been tried in the past without success, youth workers were routinely encountering and working with children oddly suspended – often technically as well as metaphorically – outside the school system. They also felt that superficial engagement with children – necessitated by a thin provision of resources – drove frustrated education professionals to misrecognise the way that children experiencing trauma and adversity may in fact be reaching out by being unsafe. More broadly, within the school system of normalised and invisibilised expectations, the interactions of very vulnerable children and their families could only be experienced as jarring and otherworldly. As such, from workers' perspectives, the professional vision of this cohort of children from inside schools tended to shrink to a pin-hole in the end, setting up an unchecked spiral of disengagement:

> Refuge worker: So it's adults looking at them like, you've made these choices in life, it's your fault…And somewhere, adults have to play the adult role and put everything in context and I just don't think that's happening.

> Outreach worker: [It] becomes problematic if they haven't got that support there, then the issues never get addressed. The young person is going, 'School is doing nothing for me. They are not making it interesting for me so why go?' And there is that cycle where the school says, 'Oh well, they are not turning up.' I think you have got to put the brakes on somewhere and just ask those questions. 'What seems to be some of the issues?' Sometimes the questions aren't asked and you don't get people standing up for a young person saying, 'Well, hang about. What needs to change to get that young person back?'

As will be discussed in the following chapter, youth workers understood themselves as having a key role – with limited but targeted capacity – to broaden and deepen schools' engagement with their clients. And where it was safe and part of the scope of their roles, they sought to undertake similar work with children's families or other key stakeholders in children's lives. This work focused on helping those significant in children's lives to identify and respond to their needs more effectively and in the process create hope in their lives. The constant stress for youth workers was that in having to undertake such extensive advocacy work with others, their most critical role – being therapeutically present for the child – could be put at risk.



CHAPTER THREE

‘No one else is doing it’: How youth workers support school access and participation

This chapter offers an overview of the ways in which youth workers attempt to address the barriers to school access and participation experienced by their young clients. An insight into the activities workers undertake both deepens understanding of the barriers to school they seek to address and makes clear the range of gaps in support that they try to patch over.

The chapter organises a description of workers’ school re-engagement activities across the key challenges to well-being identified in Chapter Two and explores how workers are torn between providing therapeutic and material support to children and families, offering practical support to schools and undertaking ongoing school-focused advocacy. Some workers expressed hopelessness about the likely limited futures of children whose education is both disrupted and incomplete.

This chapter identifies both challenges and enablers in the school re-engagement support of youth workers and gives shape to an understanding of what is still needed to ensure that schools can become places through which the rights of *all* students to learning might be realised. A focus on what is still needed is taken up in the second part of the chapter, which emphasises both the absence and desperate need, in youth workers' perspectives, for more specialist care to be available. This care, they argue, is the currently missing pivot that both youth workers *and* teachers sorely need to realise the common goal of delivering hope, social opportunity and social change through school-based education.

Being alone: Offering therapeutic relationships

As discussed in Chapter Two, love and safety are observed to be frequently missing in the lives of youth workers' clients, in some cases since birth. Often emotionally and practically alone, without significant adults able to provide the level of guidance and care needed, children's capacity to operate in expected, age-appropriate and safe ways is significantly impacted. Workers consistently identified that striving to improve children's ability to self-regulate and form healthy relationships is their core business and, in their perspective, lies at the heart of re-engaging children with school.

Where workers deliver programs of support that include children's families, alongside specific therapeutic engagement with children they also seek to address what they see as the broader context of family dysfunction which in turn informs the school access issues faced by children. Several workers described intensive work undertaken to engage with families and support them – practically and therapeutically – in understanding how to make the care and schooling needs of their children a priority. For these workers, creating a sense of care and safety for children was centrally about teaching parents the foundational basics of routine and supporting them to engage in nurturing relationships with their children:

> Outreach worker: [Young client, aged 13] had been living with another adult, a family friend. But then we did get him home to Mum and I was picking him up from home, getting him there [school], helping Mum to get him prepared for school and talking about what that looks like…So it was working with Mum to understand the importance that if she could get up early and help get him up after she was up, that would really help his ability to get to school…So it was about routine in that family, let's all get up at 7 o'clock, let's all have breakfast, let's make lunch together.

> So for that period, I think, for the first week of school I went there three days in the week [at] 7.30am, help them make lunch, help take them to school. We then found out the bus route that was best for them go – Mum didn't have transport. I think the second week, we all took the bus together to school. The third week, I think I went once with them. And then I was still working with the young person and that seemed to be good for a few weeks.

> Outreach worker: So I got the referral and started working with that family…I was at their house at 6.45am in the morning several days a week…I helped them get themselves up, their kids get up, go through the packing the lunchbox, trying to remain calm, getting the kids to the bus stop and off to school.

In their work with unaccompanied children no longer or only tenuously engaged with their families, the central focus on addressing the lack of love and safety in their lives came through directly offering stable and 'unconditional care' to children themselves and through engaging children in intensive self-regulation therapy. As such, workers described extending to children the opportunity to enter into a relationship of trust which offers both boundaries and unconditional acceptance:

> Refuge worker: So generally what they need, is they need to know they're going to be safe somewhere. They need stability. So usually here, that's setting a routine with them really quickly. Setting boundaries really quickly, building rapport really quickly, managing behaviours consistently and fairly, not come down like a ton of bricks, or you know, ignore it. But also addressing behaviours in the way it works – we're dealing with something you did, not who you are…I think our biggest role would be the unconditional care…

Offering and growing children's experience of a safe adult relationship was seen by workers as the foundation of children's healing and of physiologically teaching them what trust and safety can feel like – in order that eventually they too could reproduce these feelings in forming their own relationships. As one worker described, this kind of therapeutic immersion and relational modelling was about engaging kids in safely '*doing* relationship':

> Outreach worker: Our relationship's just fundamental and it's key and I spend most of time, if not all of it, just doing relationship. Because a lot of the research would show that that, in and of itself, is going to create the foundation that even if I'm not around in the future, which I won't be, but for whatever reason, say they leave the state or…I can't continue working with them because they're incarcerated…they're still going to have that to take them into the rest of their life. And that's that safe person who taught them that human beings can be okay…It's relationship that failed them in the first place, so it has to be the relationship…that's going to provide them some sort of a launching pad into the future…

Fundamentally, for youth workers, teaching regulation is about laying new neurological and physiological patterns in the developing brains and bodies of children, 'new foundations and new maps for what they are capable of':

> Outreach worker: I'm going to focus on activities that actually help kids to start to feel safe because if you're not regulating…you don't feel safe and you're just not going to be able to function that day…[You] don't throw rubbish on the ground. You don't swear at people when they're walking past for no reason. You don't steal from shops. You say please and thank you at the register. Just real basic skills of being in the community. But we do that week after week and we have incident after incident, but I keep coming back and back…So to try and teach them something, I just walk them through it.

> Outreach worker: Probably one of the things that I do most in my work is around emotional regulation. So kids who are unable to regulate. I'll do a lot of that work with young people. And more often than not, when you meet with the parents, the parents struggle with their emotional regulation too. So you know, you've got petrol and fire at home and up she goes. So education of young people on how to regulate their emotions. I do a lot of safety planning with kids, you know…it's like a sanctuary model thing where we go through and identify, you know, their triggers and their indicators and then we put a safety plan in place.

Alongside their work to support children's safe self-regulation within their family and peer networks and in their broader communities, undertaking such work directly in school environments was understood as critical to children behaving safely, and experiencing safety, at school. Accompanying children onto school grounds, spending time with them at school and developing school safety plans with children and schools were seen by workers as key practical contributions they could make to support children's ongoing school participation.

Youth workers described functioning in a linchpin role between children and their school, working where possible and appropriate to provide in-school therapeutic support, sharing contextual information with children's consent, and developing school-specific safety plans to support children's self-regulation in the classroom and playground. For workers, these activities were needed to equip school staff with the right knowledge in order to avoid the destructive interpretation of children's struggles as simply 'poor behaviour, defiant behaviour'.

Safety planning was described as 'helping the school understand that person' and giving schools 'the opportunity to deliver education [and] as far as they are able to, deliver it in a way that best suits [children's] individual needs':

> Outreach worker: So, if little Johnny or little Julie is having a rough day and is really struggling with all the noise and everything in the class, what can happen so that they are able to have a bit of time out to regulate…and come back to class without other students knowing that they are struggling or whatever.

> Outreach worker: I do really extensive self-regulation plans. So we write, you know, from zero to ten, when you're at a one, what are you doing, what does it look like, what do you need to happen. When you're at a two, when you're at a three – what should you be doing at a three? So I print, laminate up all these plans and do about 70, 000 of them for the school so teachers have them, front office have them, support people have them, so that when things are going wrong they've got that.

Through undertaking their own versions of 'school work' with children, workers identified key triggers and diversions, which could then be shared with teachers and used to support children in the classroom:

> Outreach worker: I do school work. So, if the kids aren't at school, well…I do a lot of art therapy with the kids and I have them sit down and do projects with me. And they don't recognise a lot of the time that they are telling me a lot about their concentration levels, their self-regulation, their attention to detail or lack of, their risk-taking behaviours…And we will work on key words during that, that I can then pass onto staff at school…So if a kid ends up…escalating, they are having a moment, they are having an issue, hopefully I can give the teacher a toolbox as well as the child.

Schools were seen as important, positive and collaborative partners in developing and implementing safety plans. Workers acknowledged that they needed the insights of school staff in order to develop effective plans:

> Catherine: Is there anything else that you are doing?
> Outreach worker: Like safety plans at school as well…writing up a safety plan and giving it out…So that is a document that then the child and the school can have.
> Catherine: So what is the process for that?
> Outreach worker: Having a meeting. Sitting down, having a meeting, asking each school and that staff and that coordinator what will happen if this child loses the plot? How do we mitigate this? What do you do? What would you like to do? And look it is a really hard situation because you know as the worker what is going to work for the child…but you are not in the classroom with the child…and the teacher knows the child on this level, on the classroom level and who they are interacting with and how they self-sabotage…So the teacher will say, 'Oh, this will work or this will work or this will work,' And it's a really nice collaboration because you can say, 'Mmm, right, that's interesting. I thought maybe also this.' Or, 'Oh, I hadn't thought of that. Great, let's just use that.

Despite the collaboration of schools on safety plans, ultimately it was youth workers – both refuge and outreach workers – who were advocating for, initiating and distributing these for their clients. Given the capacity restrictions on refuge workers, however, it was only outreach workers who discussed having scope to provide physical support for their clients in school settings. Although some outreach workers reported not being allowed on school grounds, others appeared to have been able to do this, but they had to 'push':

> Outreach worker: I have pushed schools hard to say 'Actually I want to sit with this kid for the first half hour of their school day. And I am going to come back at the first 10 minutes of lunch and I am just going to sit here…and just be a passive observer'. Schools don't like it at all and look, there are fair reasons that they don't like it but sometimes it's just better for the kid that they have someone supportive with them.
> Catherine: Why don't you think schools can support that?
> Outreach worker: Because then everyone would have a worker in there and maybe everyone needs a worker in there…Because it's pretty scary some of these schools… Kids being bullied, kids being bullied by other kids, kids being bullied by teachers who are just overworked sometimes…

Missing out: Brokering basics

Alongside building relationships of care through which to undertake foundational therapeutic work, where possible youth workers coordinate funding for the material basics children need. Where their own programs did not have access to brokerage funds for children's incidental needs, they identified other funding schemes and community organisations, liaised with extended family members to try and raise needed funds to cover basics, or personally paid for some small items. It was clear, however, that for the clients of both outreach and refuge workers, the need for material basics was comprehensive:

> Outreach worker: Well, we need to be able to, we need to meet with the school, we need to get a timetable, we need to get them school clothes, we need to get them school bags, we need to organise if they've lunches to go to school, just everything. Just that whole thing that parents would do for young people. You need to re-set them back up for school, because they don't have uniforms. They don't have school bags, they don't have school books, they don't have anything.

> Refuge worker: Yeah, so we definitely support with purchasing the school uniform and all the school supplies and we try and make that a fun experience when we do that. So we'll go out with them and get them to pick their own bag, so they have ownership over that. Get them to pick their books and their stationery supplies and that sort of thing.

Funding for children's transport was consistently raised as an issue, especially for those who were living away from both home and their local area. Workers appeared not to have access to a consistent point of contact through which to coordinate free public bus transport to school for their clients. Some services seemed to be able to access emergency relief funds for individual tickets. For those children with subsidised student GreenCards (public bus travel cards), constant difficulties arose where cards had been issued for free home-to-school bus transport on specific routes which no longer applied for homeless children trying to access school from potentially multiple geographical areas.

In workers' experience, these children often lack ready access to parental consent and the relevant paperwork required to evidence their application for new subsidised GreenCards – which nonetheless would again be redundant if their address or school changed:

> Outreach worker: The majority of the time we will put, because at that age they're not getting any Centrelink payments when they're under 15, and so we will put money on their Metro card. Some of them have the free student Metro card but then because if they're couch-surfing, their address isn't lining up with what is on their Metro card, so the Metro buses don't let them on the bus. It's just constantly like ahhhhhhh!!!

Overall, the key message emerging is that workers experienced ongoing and time-consuming barriers in meeting the material needs of their clients. Further, as one worker argued, the flexibility to spend money on material basics was of course central to promoting everyday positive household interactions:

> Outreach worker: If we want to help people on a practical level, we have got to be able to help them…So for example, I have got a family that have got nowhere to do their homework other than sitting on a bed leaning on a knee kind of doing it, you know. A cheap $150 table and chair set from down at the Salvos…and then you would think the flow on effect, sitting around the table as a family et cetera, et cetera, et cetera…Buying a doona cover. Letting a child pick a doona cover and their room becomes their safe space and they then want to go to bed [and then] they will get up and go to school the next day. Little things like that shows you care and opens that doorway up…So as a worker, I need to be able to buy a school uniform if that is what I think is what is needed here or whatever else. I need flexibility…

Where possible workers were creative in trying to address kids' basic needs which, as described below, could be rewarding but often required not just money but intensive one-to-one support:

> Outreach worker: [Young client] didn't want to catch the bus on his own because he didn't…he hadn't been on a bus like that before…We talked together, what shall we do about it. And we ended up – we got a bike for him and he got to school.

> Started riding to school from where he was living now. And got him a backpack and some things that he needed, you know, to be able to get there and some decent shoes and what-not. And some clothes because it was cold, you know, in winter time, so some long pants not short pants, bike helmet…And we'd even drive, do the route, so this is where we go and so we can visualise it…

More generally, the obvious and significant material basic workers reported children struggled with is access to safe and stable shelter and care for unaccompanied homeless children – without which, they argued, school could rarely be maintained:

> Refuge worker: First and foremost is a safe and stable place to be when home's not safe…Step one is stability for young people. Because everything else is meaningless if they don't have that.

For children in their middle years, however, the scarcity of stable supported accommodation was described as a relentless barrier, which left workers to 'negotiate with families that aren't necessarily safe':

> Refuge worker: There is no option for anyone under 16 to find a lease. There are no exit points for anyone under 15 from here. So first and foremost is safety while they're here and then look for a safe place for them to go from here [crisis accommodation]… Because we are very short-term accommodation with – you know, you don't have privacy, you don't have your own room. We don't have any kind of specialist support here to support around, like, emotionally what's going on for you, socially what's going on. We don't have those resources, we don't have access to long-term accommodation for young people. All we can do is sometimes negotiate with families that aren't necessarily safe.

Floundering: Unpacking behaviour

As already argued, a central part of youth workers' efforts to address children's physical and emotional health was their engagement in therapeutic relationships through which the teaching of self-regulation skills could take place. The common goal expressed by workers was to offer children skills in understanding and better managing the physiology of emotions and behaviour. This teaching could be as explicit as explaining the workings of neurobiology to children in groups or individually. It could also be implicit in workers' basic modelling of appropriate social interaction and engagement of children in age-appropriate activities, in art and play therapies, in the use of motivational interviewing techniques and exposure therapy.

Workers also described their focus on assisting children with meeting basic health needs, including personal hygiene and dental checks, addressing common childhood infections, hearing and vision testing, mental health support and physical, sexual and reproductive health support. They supported children following accidental injury as well as in the context of physical and intellectual disability. As earlier discussed, where workers perceived potentially undiagnosed cognitive and physical disabilities, they played an active role in advocating with schools for specialist assessments:

> Refuge worker: Yeah, there's really limited support for this small cohort of young people. It's really only the social worker or if there's a psychologist there. If the school does have a psychologist, I always try and get them to do assessments.

One worker outlined how, where advocacy efforts were not successful, she lobbied her own community service organisation for funds to privately pay for a child's assessment:

> Outreach worker: So what do I do as a worker? The child is booked in for a psychologist to be assessed in all areas. That is a three hour assessment that I do get to sit in with the child…That also costs $800 because I want it done quick. I am not waiting six months for this to happen which is what you would normally wait, so I looked into private for the client and went, 'No, we're paying it'. So that's a big deal. Hopefully there will be an assessment done and we will find out that it will be NDIS. We will get full package and this kid will have a very different [school] experience.

For other workers, however, if their advocacy with schools to undertake assessments failed, it often meant that children's needs were simply not diagnosed or met, as they were most commonly *without* the resources to fund and support private assessments.

Being excluded: Education advocacy

Through workers' descriptions of their school engagement work, a clear picture emerged of a very specific cohort of children set aside in 'limbo land' from schools in many cases:

> Outreach worker: Some of these youths can be viewed as troublemakers in the community and so become even more disassociated with a school or a school makes it difficult to enrol. A school can claim that a young person is out of geographic area, the school does not have capacity to take them in, or there are families involved with the school that would not accept their placement due to bullying or the like. That places a lot of onus on a youth worker as the families look to them to find a solution. At times Education Department representatives can be very unsupportive to these families and not suggest or investigate further options with them.

> Outreach worker: The ones that have been excluded from the school, they're then out in limbo land…And that's where it could be a kid that you've got at [School A] but [School A] exclude them, and then you try to put them into [School B] – sorry, they're not in geographical area. It's like, well, they've gotta go somewhere to school…

As such, initial re-engagement was not about engaging children with school, but instead about re-engaging *schools* with children:

> Outreach worker: The school doesn't refer half of these kids because they haven't been to school for 8 months. They're not even on their radar any more, like that's long gone. So the ones that are on their radar are the ones that just had the issues two weeks ago, because the school have so many kids, that's the ones. *These* ones are nowhere near to be seen. Just nowhere near. So we have, out of all our 30 something clients who are totally disengaged with school, a lot of them you know who live this lifestyle, we have two that are on the Wellbeing Team.

For schools to firstly engage with youth workers and secondly to re-engage with their clients, workers felt there was a lot of pressure on them to form good relationships with the schools in order to best advocate for their clients and their families:

> Outreach worker: It takes relationships, it takes a lot of relationships. So you've got to make the school love you and you've got to make them like your kid and you've got to make them willing to do the stuff because if they are just doing it so they can *say* they've done it and you walk away and they don't, then you've got no hope. Then you're fucked.

> Outreach worker: Building really good relationships with the school staff, the key staff, is so important, right, for the youth worker, because if you've failed at that, you've failed that kid. You don't want to have the school say, 'Oh, what do they want?', or 'I haven't got time for them right now'. We've got to make sure they've got time for us, because we're the ones bringing that child in to them. We're the ones that have to put time into the child. And we're the ones the parents and carers look to for a solution a lot of the time.

Their need to form positive relationships reflected their vulnerability as youth workers attempting to professionally interface with schools from the outside. This vulnerability was mirrored in their clear sense of 'bringing…in' their clients, and where possible their clients' families, from the outside. Just like their clients and their families, youth workers often felt acutely alone in their approaches to schools. Further, as one worker argued, the isolation of children from school was in fact so great they could become confused and assume that youth workers were in fact a part of schools:

> Outreach worker: [Young client] thinks *we* do school. Because we're everything to school. A lot of the kids think we do school. Because that's all they see is, we're the only people who say, right, we've gotta get you back to school, we've gotta do this. Because nobody comes to their door or tries to find them or sends letters or does anything. So they just don't go to school and nothing happens. So then you get a [youth worker] and they push you to go back to school, or they try to set up meetings for you to go back to school. And that's what they see, they don't see anything else. Cos there's nothing, there's no one else. No one does anything.

An awareness of children's, families' and their own isolation brought to bear great responsibility and personal pressure to be able to offer 'hope' and to become a successful navigator or 'avenue' to school in the apparent absence of other engagement:

> Outreach worker: They need hope to start with. They need to be able to access education when they are ready. Because I'm talking about kids that have struggled, that have been disengaged in some way. When they're ready it needs to be – there needs to be an avenue for them and they need, well, they need a person to be able to help navigate getting them enrolled in the right sort of education. And if that's not the parent, who is it? If they're disengaged from school it's going to be someone like me.

Workers' perception that 'no one does anything' played out in multiple ways, but of particular note were their discussions of advocating for enrolment, supporting children during periods of suspension and taking on responsibility for teaching and tutoring children with clear learning issues where they had scope to do so. Again, this brought pressure and stress as youth workers were not always resourced or professionally equipped to undertake such work.

Alongside consistently having to advocate for schoolwork to be made available for children during suspensions, workers were then faced with the practical dilemma of how to support children with this given their duty of care to other children and young people. Further, for children who are couch-surfing or in refuges, the even bigger issue as workers saw it is how to keep children in a routine, and most importantly *safe*, when they can't be at school:

> Outreach worker: At the moment I have got one young person that has just in the last term had two 10-day suspensions at the age of nine…So not setting up a really good desire to be at school and a good pattern.

> Refuge worker: We've just found [that] the whole suspension thing, for this particular group of young people, it's not effective. So we might have a young person that goes to school, they get suspended for maybe four days, and then they're actually engaging with older kids who are engaged with drug use, crime, violence and things like that, so it's actually safer for them to be at school than to be suspended.

Workers reported undertaking advocacy and activities within their own organisations to support children's learning, including hiring tutors and helping where possible with homework and school work obtained for completion during suspension:

> Outreach worker: As an organisation, we have had workers previously advocate to get tutors and we have. We have tutors ongoing for clients and we have had little study sessions and stuff for clients and just paid for tutors.

> Refuge worker: That's something that I have to do when the kids have been excluded from schools. When kids have been excluded from schools, instead of them being supportive or 'the kid is out of school, this is what he needs to do', I have to actually demand, 'Can you send down some work for them to do?' We can supervise that. A hard thing to get out of schools is anything for them to do.

At the heart of this schoolwork support was a concern to both 'catch [clients] up on all the years they've missed out' and to fill the special relational gap of 'someone who can teach them':

> Refuge worker: Because I think, at the end of the day they don't have a relationship with teachers. Like sometimes I think god, I wish was I was a primary school teacher because then I could teach this kid how to read and write. But I'm not a primary school teacher…So sometimes to try and get them to homework, it then leads on to realising they don't have x, y, z skill, be it writing, reading, et cetera and then I don't have the skills to teach them how to do that, so then it sort of – it gets complicated, because I try and help, but then it's like, 'oh god, I need a teacher!'

As this same worker described, despite her lack of training she worked to offer a young client what she movingly described as 'the best two weeks of his life' spent on suspension whilst homeless and living in a youth refuge. During this period she devoted 5 hours a day to teaching him, very quickly discovering during that he was almost completely illiterate:

> Refuge worker: So my support with him was I asked the school to provide him with the schooling books that he would be doing, that I would be doing, in his two weeks of suspension. In the end, we got these books, they were probably about a year four, year five level maybe…So we did five hours a day…So he had two hours in the morning with me, where we did his schooling and tutoring and then he had an hour cooking, because he loved cooking…and then we'd do an outing. But…he couldn't even write. Like, he was writing letters and they were like flipped around or incorrect and I'd say, 'Well, what's that?'…And he's like, 'I don't know'. And he actually didn't know how to write his ABC, so I scrapped his books and he did his ABCs. So I would write the ABC capitals – little, capital, then we'd do his vowels…But yeah, we'd sing ABCs and write them out and then every day we'd try and improve his handwriting… basics, you know?

Given this worker had responsibility for up to six children and young people aged 13-20 years at any one time in the refuge, this intensive support was something the refuge could only support as a once-off engagement:

> Refuge worker: [The client] just like[d] the attention of having someone there and you know, he really enjoyed – best two weeks of his life, sort of – you know what I mean? [But] it's not sustainable, I couldn't do that. If four came in, could I do that?...I've got to be very careful that I'm not setting up an unrealistic precedent, because I'm a short-term person in their lives, I'm not going to be the continuum, so I can't set up supports that I can't continue, if there's no one else to continue them.

As this worker's powerful story illustrates, the crisis-oriented and time-limited role that most youth workers play in children's lives can make lasting positive intervention difficult to achieve. Further, refuge workers in particular have a duty of care to multiple children, making focused support work difficult with only one worker on shift.

More broadly, whilst workers clearly expressed their desire to support children both with accessing school and with their ongoing participation, school-focused advocacy and support took up a frustratingly large proportion of client time for many workers:

> Outreach worker: So it takes away from trying to just engage with the kids and linking them up with other services, where it's all just focused on education. Spend more time trying to reconnect them back with families. Like that's what we need to be doing, especially when they are ten to fourteen years old. They need to be going back to their families...They're babies.

Workers stressed that they require substantial time for therapeutic interventions which they see as ultimately *foundational* to improving a wide range of outcomes for children in the longer term, including educational attainment. But again workers felt the constant pressure of knowing that their clients had few other immediate school engagement supports and the tension of where and how to focus their efforts remained unresolved:

> Outreach worker: Because we need to go back to more therapeutic work, not just focused on school. But you need to be because no one else is doing it.

Finally, not only did youth workers worry about tensions in best supporting their clients with school access and participation, they also remained acutely aware of other vulnerable children who they believed were not likely to be receiving any support at all:

> Catherine: What do you think would happen for these kids' schooling if you weren't in their lives?
> Outreach worker: I think they'd just fall through the gaps. They just wouldn't go. Like I know there's so many kids out there that our clients talk to us about, that have no workers, have no one in their life. They're not going to school, I don't even know if the

> school realises they're not going to school. You know, there's no one there supporting them back into the school system. And it just gets harder and harder for those kids to even wanna go back to school.

> Outreach worker: And what about the kids who aren't involved in [outreach program]? What about all those kids out there who aren't? That's all I can think of. We've just got kids who haven't, who are just not going to school. *Not*.

For some workers, whilst going back to school was their ultimate aim for clients, they also felt completely overwhelmed by the impacts of generational poverty and trauma in their clients' lives. These workers were acutely aware of, and deeply distressed by, how much had been lost in children's lives by the time they might meet them as a client of an outreach or homeless service. For children in their middle years, they argued, intervention comes just too late:

> Outreach worker: Opportunity was taken away from [these kids] long before they got to school, so let's not kid ourselves that we've got some magic wand that's going to change this.

> Refuge worker: I really feel strongly about education, I really – I don't think kids are ever going to get that. Like, honestly, like ever, because they've just missed so much. So it's just something continuously that's going to be an issue unless it's looked at from zero to five and onwards, like that core years. So it's – I think for that particular [middle years] cohort and that age group, like some of those barriers are there, could they be addressed? Maybe. But is that ever going to be meaningfully done? Like, are they going to go back and learn the building blocks, their ABC, their English, their maths? Are they going to go and learn their times tables? You know, we're talking really basic foundational blocks who then lead on to – I don't think that's ever going to happen. And that's really sad, because you're just lost. Like you are trying to catch up for 13 years, not just one year you've missed, Year 7.

Workers' intense grief and pessimism about the loss of both family and education that children experience in their lives was mirrored in the fear they observe in children and young people aging out or timing out of youth workers' services or programs. These were children, one worker mourned, unlikely to leave a world of poverty and trauma because they remained uneducated; instead, they are trapped in a world with 'no horizon':

> Refuge worker: And it's sometimes, you know that kids that have left here [crisis refuge], they've got too old to access…and you just sort of well, you know, they get really emotional about it, they get scared because they know they can't come back and it's sort of – it's hard to watch, because it's sort of like, who's going to be there? They don't have that education, they've never had it, they've never had early learning. And it's just – they're not ever going to leave that world, because they don't have anything…Sometimes I just think there's no horizon…Are they ever going to have someone come in and actually re-teach them what they didn't learn as kids?

Just surviving: Identifying options

Although children's lives were described as 'bleak', with poor family relationships, few opportunities at school or for undertaking 'normal' activities with 'normal' peers outside of school settings, where possible workers offered social experiences that might be considered routine for many other children but which for this cohort may be very special. This included taking children to cafés, to the beach, to the movies, bushwalking, taking them shopping for food and clothing or engaging them in sporting, musical or arts-based activities that they wouldn't normally have access to.

More fundamentally, it was through such activities that workers also encouraged children to expand their vision of their own skills and of what they might be able to achieve. Through practical immersion, workers aimed to therapeutically and relationally undertake the slow work of rebuilding 'the foundation' of children's neurological and physiological approach and attachment to the world:

> Outreach worker: So these kids essentially, have just checked out of life and they're just surviving. So my role is kind of to come in and to try and support them to check back in and try and work out what does that look like and how can we make that something fits both what you want, but also what society kind of expects of you. That's about it. I try not to put too much emphasis on what my hopes and ideas are for the young person. But as the relationship grows, we can kind of talk about that as well, particularly once you start to see what their strengths are and what they're really good at. Sometimes, they just don't believe that it's possible to do certain things and I try to encourage or give them experiences which helps them feel like actually, that's something I *could* probably do.

As workers emphasised, expanding children's orientation to the world and to the future is not brought about by *telling* them what might be possible. Instead they focused on enabling their participation in shaping new futures by listening and collaborating with them to help them understand that they really did have options, and that they really could give voice to these:

> Outreach worker: A lot of my role is trying to get the voice of the young person heard.

> Outreach worker: And then it is about using all your other skills sets with motivational interviewing and the networks we have to put together a pool of options for them, to help them design what it is we are going to do…so they are leading it and they are growing from it and basically we are just walking alongside of them as a support. Maybe help them open a few doors here and there.

Being 'scum' and 'pov': Planting seeds

The heavy weight of 'generational hopelessness' that workers struggled with, despite periods of despair, was in the end also met with a relentless determination to hold up a range of different mirrors for children. Encouraging them to reflect upon and interrogate their own lifeworlds and broadening their interactions across a number of *different* sociocultural worlds was seen as one important step in opening awareness that different life paths might be possible:

> Outreach worker: You do see some shift and I generally think that's because they are older that they are seeing more about other people, either be it other family members make change or society in general going about things. And some of the work we will do with young people might involve running through a health checklist, which is quite extensive and having appointments and all of that, and taking opportunities to say to them, 'Haven't they got a cool job?' Or, 'What do you think of their job?' 'Oh yeah, it's all right.' 'Yeah. So, what do you reckon you might need to do something like that?' And you start trying to plant seeds and just through exposure. For some of them, you will see them just sort of really close up, their body language, and I think, oh don't do that and sometimes, no matter how well we protect ourselves at work, it just breaks your heart. But as they get older, it is like a double-edged sword. On one hand some unhelpful decision-making or thinking can be become further embedded but on the same token, just through exposure and seeing different things, that can become more valuable.

As also discussed above, this worker clarified that planting seeds is not just about formal education or about telling children what options they *should* take; it is about experiential learning to expand and empower their sense of what *could* be possible:

> Outreach worker: Just because what we think is appropriate for them in terms of careers and education doesn't make it so. What we are doing is providing options and information so that they can make informed choices. It's a whole empowerment model in itself.

Planting seeds is also a highly risky endeavour that takes place on a knife's edge, and according to this worker it could only take place in a wider context of trust, self-confidence and support:

> Outreach worker: You can sometimes help shift them out of pre-contemplation. But that also requires trust. The young person needs to trust that they are capable of that, that they are going to be supported, they are not going to be left halfway through it and not be able to complete it and it is a very scary thing. Because for some of these young people, just going to mainstream school is a massive undertaking, let alone think years ahead.

‘It needs to be a team effort’: The need for specialist care within schools

The observations made throughout this chapter throw into relief just how critical opportunities to experience trust, care and support are. Youth workers painted a picture of using experiences of trust, care and support to find pathways through the multiple barriers to school engagement faced by children experiencing vulnerability and complexity in their lives. They tried to expand children’s capacity to be safe at school through offering them experiences of interpersonal safety and through teaching and modelling self-regulation. They provided shelter, daily physical and emotional care and access to school basics, including uniform, transport and lunches. They worked to unravel children’s presenting behaviours and low comprehension and educational attainment, identifying trauma and revealing potential cognitive and physical disabilities and physical and mental illness.

They also fought hard for school access – in whatever form possible – and where necessary even attempted to teach or tutor or provide other meaningful educational activities for children themselves. They supervised children during non-attendance, during suspension, during exclusion, during part-time enrolment, during school holidays. They supported online learning and where possible facilitated and supported parents’ engagement with schools and with their children’s school activities. And most importantly, though often isolated and indeed even heart-broken, they worked to engender hope and institute positive, sustainable educational options in children’s lives.

Workers also described their responsibility for *multiple* dimensions of children’s care quite apart from school access and participation. In trying to meet children’s needs holistically, they were interacting across and advocating within multiple government agencies, such as Housing Tasmania, Child Safety, Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Tasmania Police and Youth Justice, and with numerous non-government organisations. Faced with the hierarchy of children’s needs in which shelter, safety and family relationships were necessarily dominant, the effort to enable access and participation in school was not sustainable or even possible in many circumstances. Youth workers described their efforts as circumscribed by program priorities, service delivery specifications and funding levels, staffing capacity, competing client needs and case loads. Most significantly, they were affected by the issue of *scale*; they simply could not meet the demands for referral to their programs.

In short, with such broad responsibility for the care of this cohort of children, youth workers described *needing help* from schools with school access and participation:

> Outreach worker: It needs to be a team effort, it can’t just be up to youth workers to get the kids back in.

Youth workers consistently identified that the key missing conduits were specialists who could support schools to deliver on their duty of care to provide a place of safety and belonging for all students. Specialist teachers who could provide intensive one-to-one tutoring, full-time social workers who could provide 'continuous contact', and psychologists who could help identify complex psychological, cognitive and physical challenges were the most commonly identified roles that youth workers felt were troublingly absent, or so significantly reduced in capacity that they were seen to have little more than a triage effect.

In sum, they identified a distinct lack of capacity within schools to actually work intensively and meaningfully with vulnerable children. Repeatedly, workers called for what they termed *continuous care* to be provided within schools, as the single most enduring service across children's lives. Where community-based youth and family services took on vulnerable children's needs for care in most other dimensions of their lives and for most other hours of the day and night, they needed schools to have greater capacity to continue that care during the statutory hours that children are legally required to spend with them. Workers wanted to know that when children were not in their own care they would have a school to go to, and one in which, ultimately, they might experience both love and safety.

As youth workers commonly argued, school social workers practicing in the daily environments of children are perfectly placed to respond early to newly emerging issues as well as deliver the kind of long-term continuity of care they knew worked in their own practice. Further, as opposed to workers' own programs, which for most enable them to have contact with children for 3-6 months, school services are theoretically accessible and present for nearly the *first two decades* of children's lives.

As such, social workers embedded full-time within schools, in their view, are surely best placed to lead coordination of children's schooling needs, including, most importantly, being a daily present and identifiable figure – also accessible to parents – to lead school-focused advocacy for children from *inside* the Department of Education.

In practical and emotional terms, what vulnerable children need *systemically available* within schools is 'hope':

> Outreach worker: **…someone to be able to develop a strong relationship with them and work with them towards their strengths…and for the school to be able to resourced to do that. And have the resources to be able to pull in, to help that young person succeed and feel a sense of identity and feel a sense of pride, helping motivate themselves and help them feel good about themselves.**

> Outreach worker: **They need positive encouragement. They need a sense of this is the right thing to do to go to school and they a need a sense of the school is going to support you to be here, so a sense of hope, I guess.**

Whilst this was a common vision, the reality youth workers observed statewide was quite the opposite. Whilst some could point to individual exceptions, their general frustrations focused on frequent turn-over of staff, huge caseloads and wide geographic areas that social workers attempted to work across. They saw school social workers' time filled with the provision of reactive support, limited to children on the school site; youth workers understood themselves as having to specifically advocate for their disengaged clients who were outside this limited field of vision. They saw months of lulls in referral patterns as social workers were replaced or relocated. They noted social workers' visible relief at being able to refer *out*.

In short, they felt social workers, as their own – and vulnerable children's – most valuable resource, were set up to fail them. This failure centred around lack of capacity to provide the continuity of care and to develop the depth of knowledge and local professional networks needed to advocate effectively for vulnerable children and address their complex needs.

> Catherine: So where are the social workers in this? The school social workers?
> Outreach worker: Overworked. Doing other jobs maybe. Not dealing with these extreme children. Yeah.

> Refuge worker: I think overall, you know, if a social worker is staying at a particular school for a certain amount of time and they're known there and they set up and we develop strong relationships, that works really well. What we find is, like, oh, social worker's left or another one's come in and…that sort of breaks down that relationship which means, you know, some of the young people aren't…getting some support that they may be after.

> Refuge worker: I think where the school system really falls down is they don't have that level of support for these young people and they don't sometimes know the extent of what's gone on, because [children] have never told them the full story because they've never had a good [rapport]. Like, at the end of the day, who's the rapport with? Is it with…the social worker you've seen once or twice a month?

> Refuge worker: Schools don't get full time [social workers] which is really difficult for any kids that are in need. 'Oh, you've got to wait until Friday when the social worker gets in.' So you find more and more too, teachers are having to pull up the slack, and they're not equipped…

> Refuge worker: Where at one stage you'd just go to the social worker and they'd know the lot…because they knew the family, they knew the young person, they'd supported the family and the young person to keep them in school and stuff like that. But that seems to have changed and I think it's because they spread so thin and that's the issue. They're not in the schools the time they used to be to be able to build up those relationships…They started to stretch them out to cover bigger and bigger areas…If you're a worker that comes in once a week, you're never going to be…beneficial. You've got to have a regular presence and they've got to get to know that person.

> Outreach worker: The social workers are so overloaded. They've got so many kids that they're expected to work with, and then it's a matter of them trying to prioritise which ones get more than the other one…They get moved so quickly and so frequently… It's getting them connected with the child, getting them to become involved with that child's needs as well.

Workers also characterised schools – working with little support – as problematically having to choose between teaching *all* children and teaching the curriculum. They shared a strong impression that where children get in the way of curriculum, they had to 'go':

> Catherine: So what drives that kind of attitude towards your clients?
> Outreach worker: Frustration. Frustration. Lack of understanding and lack of time I would say, to deal with that challenge at that point on. And they are frustrated. I would be frustrated if I had to deal with that kind of behaviour and I am trying to educate others at the same time. Sure.

> Outreach worker: [Teachers] see the behaviour and that's all they see….It takes effort to look past that. And teachers just don't have time, I don't think. They don't have the time. All they can see is some kid stopping them from teaching their class, so you need to go so I can get on with my job.

> Refuge worker: I think the schools are so overwhelmed with behaviour that if – it's just easier, just get rid of [them]. And that may be because of their lack of supports.

> Outreach worker: And so, there does come a point…where the teachers are like, this kid is just wasting time. It's not working for me, I will move him here. It makes sense. He's not learning. You're exactly right, that's why you've got that response, it makes sense. But he probably could learn if he'd only spent – if he spent the first hour doing regulation stuff.

Most needed by these children, in youth workers' perspective, is in fact a place of *intensified* learning support, not a conditional or limited part-time placement or the 'limbo land' of suspensions or other forms of exclusion. Most needed is time and support for teaching professionals to be able both see and work with children in ways which can recognise their very specific learning needs. In order for teachers to be able to choose to teach the majority without having to exclude a struggling or unsafe child, ideally *specialist* teachers and programs should be available within schools to support both the teacher and child:

> Refuge worker: Assign kids tutors. Do one on one learning with kids who identify as not being able to read or write…Like, you know, if you're dealing with a kid who's in Year 11 but he's at a Year 5 or Year 6 level, that's really not okay. Like in Australia, in this day and age, that is not okay. And like I have kids in those years who want to go through because no one in the family has finished school. But they can barely read or write…And I'm thinking fuck, what [are they] going to do?...You need to re-teach kids, but I mean…the enormity of that.

It was absolutely clear to workers, however, that without supports to meet what they knew only too well could at times be extremely challenging, violent, dangerous and frightening behaviour, schools would always be forced to choose to teach to the majority and 'just get rid of' the rest. This forced misrecognition of children's needs, youth workers argued, could and should be countered *within* schools with the same tools that they themselves used in their work on the 'outside'. Workers were clear that they only expected specialist support roles to be effective in schools where they become a substantiation of schools' *systemic* commitment to both poverty-informed and trauma-informed school provision:

> Outreach worker: Not everyone comes from this world here where we have got the basics of this. So yes, that would be a big one as well. Big one for me is teachers being more informed, schools being more informed.
> Catherine: Well, poverty-informed or trauma-informed?
> Outreach worker: Poverty-informed. Yeah, bingo. Exactly.

> Outreach worker: What I wish for? I wish for trauma-informed practice by our schools. That's it. Trauma-informed practice. Go and have a PD or 15…Have alternative education spaces within that education space. It just has to be accepted not tolerated by teachers. There is a really big difference…They are still kids and they need to be treated with love and kindness and respect, not just shoved through an education system. But they are not treated like that and if you are not respecting their space, then they are not respecting their space…I wish they would all try and move forward. I wish that they all had sensory processing disorder training as well, because we see it so much.

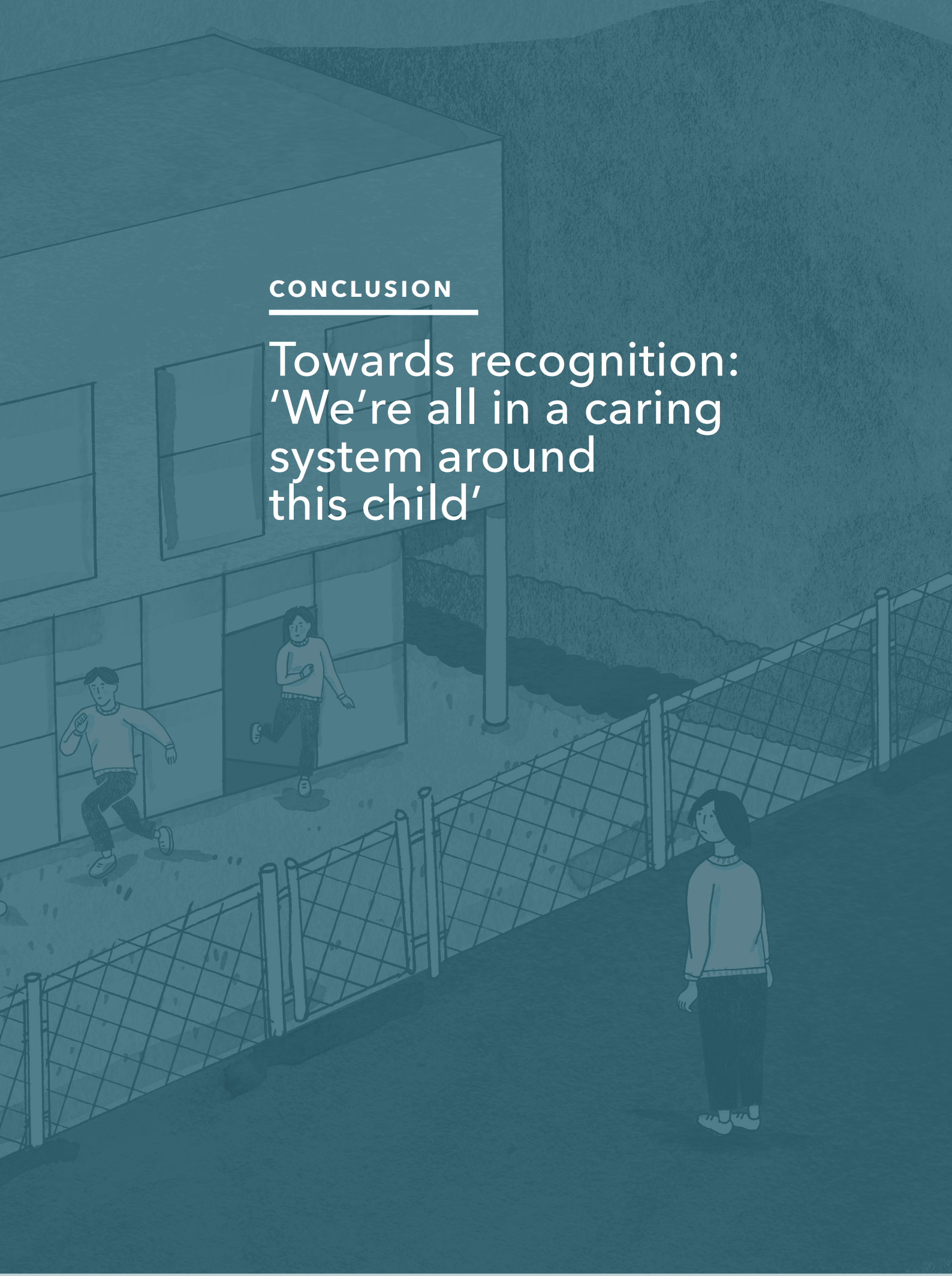
> Refuge worker: I think having education opportunities that are actually working from a trauma-informed approach as well. So actually recognising that this group of kids actually do learn differently and they need, you know, different types of education, and that they're not just going to fit into the Tasmanian curriculum. It actually needs to be more focused.

Commitment to trauma-informed practice meant not just teaching school professionals and teachers, but teaching children too:

> Outreach worker: So that's the other thing. So why am I teaching these kids about their bodies and their minds and their neurobiology? Why am I teaching it?...But that is what I am doing. The school should be doing this, the school should be doing from Grade 3 or 4. Right down there. If you can do a little kid yoga, you can teach kids about their breathing, about regulation. It's not difficult. It really isn't. So teachers can do that and definitely in science, how many more kids would be engaged in science if it was about *them*?

Ultimately, youth workers' wish was for increased capacity within schools to *hold on* to children, to have the adequate resources available to see and recognise children *as children* and *as vulnerable* and *as dependent* on the care choices made by adults around them. As centrally argued in this chapter, workers see children in desperate need of skilled education advocates working within their school settings, as without such advocacy, one worker argued, 'they don't exist':

> Refuge worker: I think they're almost invisible, these kids... they don't exist. But they need an advocate for everything. They need an advocate…to get any sort of service… We've got kids that are trying to function as adults, alone…They're children. And most of the ones that come here, nearly all of them, are traumatised, so they're that [biological] age [but] some of their [cognitive functions] are down here. Yep. And that's not being recognised. They're expected to be able to negotiate with teachers, negotiate with the world and they can't. They just can't.



CONCLUSION

Towards recognition: ‘We’re all in a caring system around this child’

This examination of youth workers' experiences of supporting their clients to access and participate in school provides a number of cues to re-think the often siloed school re-engagement effort that unfolds across community-based child, youth and family organisations and across multiple government agencies and services. The youth workers, from all regions of Tasmania, confirmed their very clear understanding that, as commonly found in broader research, 'disengagement from school is not just about school' (Butler et al. 2005, p. 9) and is one obvious presenting symptom of a range of ongoing life struggles. They also confirmed that schools have a powerful role in enabling re-engagement, a role that does not, and should not, rely on all issues driving disengagement to be resolved.

Youth worker support for school access and participation was understood as both a high priority for children and also as the starting point for unravelling and addressing other issues including poverty, lack of parental capacity and support, complex trauma and unaccompanied homelessness. What workers strikingly reported, however, is that for those children who experience extreme adversity – for example, those couch-surfing and in refuges alone – a profound rift opens up between them and schools.

For workers, this rift turns support for children's engagement in school into a 'fight' to engage schools *with children*; this was experienced as a significant shift in the tenor and focus of their work. For some, this 'residualisation' of children experiencing complex support needs within the education system (Smyth 2016, p. 134) was an overwhelming blockage in the pathway to well-being. Triggering palpable grief for youth workers is the perception that those children most in need of full and continuous care within the school setting are instead rendered as necessary 'waste', unfortunate by-products of 'middle-class institution of schooling' (Smyth 2016, p. 134; see also Mills, Renshaw & Zipin 2013).

Most workers could also describe instances of positive collaboration with Department of Education staff – individual schools, teachers and specialist Learning Services social workers. In each case, however, the significant involvement of Child Safety Services with families seemed to correlate with or leverage this greater engagement. Because they worked across cohorts of vulnerable children both with and without Child Safety involvement, however, workers were able to describe a clear sense of the shared intense adversity both cohorts can experience, but the very different service responses and supports available for those on Child Protection Orders.

As described in *Too hard?: Highly vulnerable teens in Tasmania* (Robinson 2017a), a central aspect of the high vulnerability experienced by older children not placed on Child Protection Orders is the doubled abandonment they experience at home and systemically. In the broader context of child protection system reform nationally and in Tasmania, the focus on *increased* diversion from out-of-home care through earlier intensive family intervention frames a critical issue of how the needs of older children who *still* experience complex trauma, adversity and homelessness will be managed and supported.

Specifically for those unaccompanied children without access to parent or guardian support or a stable home base, the question of which area of government should action duty of care and lead legal responsibility remains. Further, in the context of a dearth of services able to provide non-statutory care and support for older children in Tasmania (see Robinson 2017a), the humanitarian question of how multi-disciplinary care will be coordinated and delivered remains worryingly unanswered.

The *systemic residualisation* of unaccompanied older children documented in *Too hard?* makes the question of how best to ensure school access and support for this cohort *and* for other vulnerable children very difficult to answer. Workers undertake school advocacy for the vulnerable children in their care, but ultimately are hamstrung by the slow nature of this work and by the pressing immediacy of the multiple care needs children present.

The compounded barrier of no home and no school in the lives of some unaccompanied homeless children underpins a lack of hope and powerlessness in youth workers' narratives. Even within the temporary 'home' of the youth refuge, the highly restricted nature of the 'one worker' staffing model makes any sustained schooling support untenable. What this research makes clear, however, is that *home* – as a place of *stable and fully resourced care* – is critical not only to homeless children's survival but to their capacity to flourish through the realisation of their other human rights, including the right to education.

In the absence of resourced and stable ongoing care provided at home or through funded services, therapeutic support through work on self-regulation and building healthy relationships was seen as one foundational contribution workers could make to children's long-term well-being. This physiological and psychological work, undertaken alongside the practical work of meeting basic shelter, health and safety needs, was seen as a priority. It was seen as essential to everyday functioning and critical to the shaping of successful pathways back into school and the possibility of life-long learning.

However, as youth workers observed, without systemic change *within schools* – over which they had little control – kids are being set up to re-enter unmodified settings; hence the expected enduring fragility of their schooling pathways. Further, where children are re-engaged with school through alternative education programs, as Smyth (2016, p. 134) similarly asks, the lingering question for workers is always, 'is this rehabilitative approach too little too late?'. As this research illustrates, it is the case that in Tasmania vulnerable children may not have access to mainstream schools or to the recuperative work of alternate programs – offered only in some schools and only in some years of high and secondary high schools. Given the early disengagement of vulnerable children in primary school and their struggle to access mainstream schools, this certainly seems too little too late.

So while it is clear in youth workers' narratives that support for school access and participation is needed in *multiple* life domains – hence their often concurrent work across families, children, schools and communities – frustration centres on the misrecognition of children's needs within schools. This misrecognition – despite the identifiable work of some dedicated individuals or exemplary schools – was seen as a systemic outcome of the lack of capacity to hold on to children with experiences of complex adversity. As such, workers saw vulnerable children rendered outside schools by systemic default; they are 'too hard' to accommodate because the resources, supports and skills to do so within schools are limited. They saw children as adrift and in need of early educational care and advocacy from *within* the Department of Education, as the relevant specialist agency and a statutory provider of education services in Tasmania.

As clearly identified within the *2018-2021 Department of Education Child and Student Wellbeing Strategy* (2018a, p. 38), the 'alignment of agency effort to improve child and student wellbeing' is already a system priority. From youth workers' point of view, it is *increased effort* as well as the alignment of effort that is needed. Workers struggled with what they observed as a highly conditional, delayed, recuperative approach being undertaken in the face of the clear craving of vulnerable children for sustained, relationship-based schooling and for a sense of rightfully belonging in a learning environment.

In short, they wanted more for their kids and specifically, they wanted schools to have more scope to take their needed place in the 'caring system' by bringing kids back inside. This is about a commitment to children – needed from adults at all levels of the education system – to create a 'space to learn' (Australian Childhood Foundation 2010, p. 3), a space sensitive to the complex lives vulnerable children lead and the complex needs they may have. The provision of such a space is also, crucially, about the provision of 'space for hope' (Australian Childhood Foundation 2010, p. 89); hope for healing and for the positive orientation to the future that learning can enable.

Towards hope

This report ends with recommendations aimed at strengthening the capacity of schools to transition vulnerable children back into school and to hold them there. Such strengthening of end-point service delivery is most likely to emerge from a scaffolded commitment within Department of Education policy, Learning Services operations and individual schools and classrooms. For those children who face the very specific circumstances of unaccompanied homelessness it is clear that the significant barriers to school access and participation require a targeted response addressing the lack of supports for school engagement within stretched outreach and accommodation services.

Recommendation One calls for a specific Tasmanian Department of Education engagement strategy through which both resourcing and accountability can be focused on behalf of children who may need extra assistance to access and participate in school. An engagement strategy needs to outline a plan for ensuring that the legislated human right of all children to access meaningful learning is realised. This requires recognition that schools need to change their service delivery in order to meet the needs of all children, as well as strategic consideration of how and where to best implement changes.

In very practical terms, consideration of the value of free, door to door public school bus services for those children facing transport barriers should be included, alongside recognising and addressing systemic issues of school access and the availability of *full-time* participation at school for all children, even if this includes non-mainstream class activities. Further, as recognised in its Wellbeing Strategy, the Department of Education also has a role in collaboratively addressing the broader range of well-being outcomes aspired to for all Tasmanian learners. This makes addressing barriers to school access and participation all the more pressing, particularly for those children who are most vulnerable and most in need of access to a range of professional, peer and specialist supports.

Ultimately, as stated in **Recommendation Two**, the coordination and actioning of any specialist education advocacy and re-engagement work needs to be led at an operational level within Learning Services. Learning Services are perfectly placed as pivots between the Department of Education executive and schools, able to play a role in informing and holding to account both policy development and its implementation in schools.

Whilst there appears to be a range of specialist individual re-engagement work currently being undertaken by Learning Services, this research suggests it needs to be strengthened and developed into a coherent, outward-facing service known to and accessible by both government agencies and community service organisations. This research revealed that Learning Services are not widely known or understood in the youth sector as providing support for school re-engagement. Predominantly, youth workers experience school principals as the final decision-makers about the education pathways of their clients, and as such they feel avenues for further advocacy are closed.

Where children are able to return to school, it is clear that increased capacity to transition children back into learning environments after suspensions, expulsions, prolonged absences or sudden geographic dislocation is needed and would benefit both children and teachers. Currently, youth workers described children as simply having to return to the same problems after periods away, a scenario which often results in repeat suspensions or absences or extended disengagement. **Recommendation Three** suggests embedded re-engagement programs in all schools could maximise the opportunity of re-entry and also provide the specialist, one-to-one support learning support needed to bridge the very significant school absences and disruption vulnerable children can experience.

As noted in **Recommendation Four**, however, for some children – specifically those who experience unaccompanied homelessness – access to and participation in school is negatively impacted by shortfalls within both schools and youth services. Despite school re-engagement work being a key aim of youth outreach and Specialist Homeless Services, in practice staffing and resourcing severely impact the prioritisation and even possibility of such work. This is a situation not helped by the extra difficulties faced in securing access to schools for children who are mobile, face significant transport barriers, and are more likely to have experienced complex trauma and prolonged absences from school. Fundamentally, however, increased access to support services, including medium and long-term stable care, is essential to meeting the range of needs presented by vulnerable children, many of whom, youth workers believed, were likely to have no support at all.

A collaborative commitment from both the Department of Education and Communities Tasmania acknowledging and prioritising the care and schooling needs of this cohort is required. In broad terms, the human right and legal requirement for children to participate in school needs reasserting *and operationalising in service delivery*. Communities Tasmania needs to undertake service redesign – including within both Specialist Homeless Services and outreach services – with a serious awareness that these services are funded to work with school-age *children*, and therefore need to be staffed and resourced to appropriately support statutory school attendance. Department of Education needs to prioritise and resource the re-engagement support and assessment needs of this highly vulnerable and mobile cohort and understand its critical role in providing and strengthening a required holistic 'circle of care' (see Robinson 2017b, p. 7).

The existing *Partnering Agreement* (DoE 2016b) between these agencies (due to expire in 2018) which supports the educational outcomes of children in Out of Home Care may be one mechanism through which to acknowledge the urgent schooling needs of unaccompanied homeless children. The focus of support, however, should not be administrative – for example, the creation of learning plans – but on ensuring homeless children actually have access to a school, access to additional one-to-one learning supports where required, and access to learning and cognitive assessments. Further, the geographic mobility of homeless children and the broader experience of having to negotiate access to new schools highlights the need for any funding for specialist learning support to be attached *to the child* rather than the school. This would help circumvent the problem of a lack of adequate support being the reason schools may feel unable to accept the enrolment of vulnerable children.

Alongside better coordination of effort between the Department of Education and Communities Tasmania, a clear stand-out in youth workers' narratives is the need for significantly increased social work presence in schools. Whilst youth workers can coordinate responses to the range of needs their clients present, they cannot undertake specialist work in all areas, and indeed are unlikely to have access to schools to provide on-site support.

Just as specialist workers are needed to take on a mental health response for their clients, as framed in **Recommendation Five** youth workers need social workers in schools to undertake school-focused support and advocacy, including providing relationship-based care on site, coordinating assessments, and liaising with Learning Services and other government and community sector supports. The *regular* daily presence of social workers was seen as the crucial factor in building accessible therapeutic relationships for children, local service knowledge and the necessary deep understanding of individual families and communities. As discussed by youth workers, children crucially need an onsite professional available to implement and monitor care and safety plans – for the benefit of children, teachers and the whole school community.

Whilst the increased capacity of social workers was seen as vital for children, teachers and schools as a whole, as clarified in **Recommendation Six** such therapeutic capacity was seen by youth workers as only one part of *systemic* implementation of trauma-informed and poverty-informed service delivery. Trauma-informed and poverty-informed service delivery includes individual practice and professional development for all school staff, but also includes a focus on making the entire school environment – its rules, regulations, expectations, routines, communications and physical design – sensitive to the needs of children impacted by trauma, stress and adversity. Further, workers argued that there is a need for teaching and learning on trauma-informed and poverty-informed practice to be included as a mandatory unit of study for university students undertaking Bachelor of Education degrees.

Workers emphasised that trauma resources (for example DoE 2016c) or even trauma-informed service delivery, though both essential, are not enough; they also saw a lack of understanding of poverty in children's lives as a significant barrier to school access and participation. In particular, workers raised serious duty of care concerns about the use of suspension for children who may face risk at home or who do not have a home environment. Concerns were also raised about children's lack of access to schoolwork

during suspension and a lack of meaningful re-entry support to avoid repeat suspension. Arguably, a *resourced* poverty-informed and trauma informed approach to school discipline would enable very different responses to disciplinary issues which might better protect the safety of children and in fact trigger opportunities to make positive change.

Together, these six recommendations begin to articulate what decisions to create a 'space for hope' (Australian Childhood Foundation 2010, p. 89) could look like. They reflect just one viewpoint into the lives of children who experience a range of vulnerabilities, only further compounded by the current lack of capacity in schools to accommodate, nurture and teach them. For Shaddock, Packer and Roy (2015, p. 14), creating a space for hope for children with complex needs and challenging behaviours requires an ambitious "whatever it takes" student-centred vision which insists that 'schools are *for* students, and for *all* students' (Shaddock, Packer & Roy 2015, p. 13). As portrayed in this investigation of youth workers' re-engagement experiences, such a hopeful vision of student-centred schools is already active in the work of individual professionals working both inside and outside of the education system in Tasmania. The challenge is systemically embedding this vision for the benefit of *all* Tasmanian children.

Too often without a legitimated and therefore resourced space inside schools, youth workers reported feeling both they and education professionals must fight to retain spaces for hope for vulnerable children and for themselves. Here recognition of systemic barriers in the provision of school to vulnerable children is essential. As it stands, the current onus appears to be on vulnerable children to address their own trauma and poverty in order to be able to go to school; and in the absence of systemic change and obvious avenues for systemic advocacy, youth workers must support children in this project. Legally, ethically and ideally, any investment in supporting (some) children outside of school – such as through community-based youth services – should be maximised through a systemically supported, concurrent transition into school. As argued in this report, inclusive schooling requires not just recognition of vulnerable children's specific needs, but of why it is that schools have been unable to hold onto them in the first place.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION ONE: RECOGNISE THE SCHOOL RE-ENGAGEMENT RIGHTS AND NEEDS OF TASMANIAN CHILDREN IN POLICY

The Tasmanian Department of Education should implement a school re-engagement strategy, including capacity to benchmark and monitor progress and outcomes through rigorous data collection from mainstream, alternative and home schooling provisions.

RECOMMENDATION TWO: DEVELOP CENTRALISED SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT COORDINATION SERVICES

Learning Services should develop responsive, publicly visible engagement coordination services to lead advocacy and action on schooling needs and, where needed, facilitate involvement in care planning with allied government and community sector family, child and youth services.

RECOMMENDATION THREE: EMBED RE-ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS IN SCHOOLS

Primary schools, high schools and secondary high schools/colleges must offer embedded, specialist re-engagement programs to support children's re-entry to school following suspension, expulsion and prolonged absence, and offer temporary schooling for children experiencing geographic dislocation.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR: RESPOND TO THE SPECIFIC SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING NEEDS OF UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS CHILDREN

The Tasmanian Department of Education and Communities Tasmania must acknowledge and resource responses to the specific re-engagement and learning needs of unaccompanied homeless children. This should include a commitment by the Department of Education to prioritise engagement support and learning assessment for this cohort and a commitment by Communities Tasmania to address service gaps and design issues, including staffing ratios, within homelessness and outreach services accessed by children.

RECOMMENDATION FIVE: STRENGTHEN THE PRESENCE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN SCHOOLS

This research recommends a significant increase in social work capacity in schools in order to provide continuous, relationship-based care for children; to liaise and collaborate with allied government and community sector supports; and to implement care and safety plans in the school environment.

RECOMMENDATION SIX: RESOURCE THE SYSTEMIC IMPLEMENTATION OF TRAUMA-INFORMED AND POVERTY-INFORMED SERVICE PROVISION IN SCHOOLS

The Tasmanian Department of Education should review how whole school environments can be systemically shaped as sites deeply sensitive to experiences of trauma and poverty. This should include professional development for all teaching and non-teaching school staff; teacher's aide resourcing to support the implementation of responses to the specific learning needs of children impacted by trauma; and trauma-informed and poverty-informed revision of approaches to student behaviour and discipline, in particular suspensions.

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