

Benseman, J. (2006). Effective Programmes for NEET young people: a case study evaluation. *Social Work Review*, XVIII(3), 43-60

The transition from school to education, employment or training

The transition phase of moving from compulsory schooling to tertiary training, education or employment is an important part of the life cycle in most societies. When this transition is achieved successfully, young people enter their new life phase as adults with a greater likelihood of successful long-term employment, economic security and pursuing lifelong learning. When it is not managed of the two) has also become more complex and of longer duration than successfully, its effects are likely to have on-going negative consequences for some time.

The transitional phase for young people (whether it is into employment, tertiary study or combinations what previous generations faced. For example, in OECD countries, this transition phase from school into paid employment now averages 7.4 years, with an average of five years in the UK through to and average of 11.3 years in Italy (OECD, 2000, p. 69).

While the transition between schooling and adult life is complex enough for most young people, it is especially difficult for those who leave school with few, or no, qualifications. In an increasingly knowledge-oriented society and economy such as New Zealand, a lack of school qualifications makes it very difficult to access either jobs or tertiary courses that demand minimum entry-level qualifications or compete for a diminishing pool of un- or semi-skilled jobs (OECD, 2001, 2003). A recent OECD report specifically looking at transition for young people without school qualifications concluded that "Early interventions, as soon as difficulties are detected, are critical to avoid the cumulative development of handicaps that result in leaving school without any marketable qualifications" (OECD & Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2005, p. 75).

As the group of students with no qualifications in New Zealand includes disproportionately higher numbers of some social groups (especially Maori), these groups are therefore also disproportionately represented among those young people who find making successful transitions difficult (Caspi, Wright, Moffitt, & Silva, 1998; Maloney, 2003).

Similarly, youth who leave school at, or especially before, the official leaving-age (and therefore, usually without qualifications) face additional disadvantages during their transition period (OECD, 2000, p. 51).

The issue of NEETs

There is currently considerable interest therefore in those students who leave school and do not make the transition into employment, education or training (commonly referred to as NEETs – Not in Employment, Education or Training). The interest is driven by not only concerns about maintaining a skilled workforce in a competitive economy, but also the need to minimise social exclusion with its costs for both the individuals themselves and the wider community.

NEETs can be defined in a number of different ways. In New Zealand, the term usually refers to those who are “young people aged 15-19 years not in education, employment or training of at least one hour a week” (Hill, 2003, p. 5). The Ministry of Social Development (MSD) uses NEET as an indicator of ‘inactivity’ – a term that can include those young people who are not formally enrolled in an educational programme and those not formally registered, such as those involved in child-rearing activities. Hill (2003, quoting Rees, 1986) argues that this broad definition is more useful than a simple total of unemployed/not in education or training for several reasons – namely, that it includes those who are unemployed, but have been deterred from registering as unemployed or choose not to seek menial work at the minimum wage and the vagaries of people who are sporadically entering/exiting the workforce.

While there are no definitive set of conditions that necessarily lead to a young person becoming a NEET, overseas research does point to a number of factors that are commonly found among these young people. One British study (Stone, Cotton, & Thomas, 2000) lists a range of themes associated with non-participation in EET, but also a number of triggers that often lead to being inactive:

- a dysfunctional family, which might include parental violence, divorce, separation, difficult relationships with step-parents, changes in the relationship between the child and the remaining natural parent, lack of parental interest and being placed in care
- personality and behavioural difficulties including violence towards teachers and parents, difficulty in concentrating, feelings of being constrained by schools
- confidence issues including being bullied, lack of role models and disabilities or disfigurements
- traumatic events such as loss of a parent, close friend or being abandoned.

These triggers operate in different ways, but often lead to making crucial decisions (such as leaving school or home) at a very young age without any advice or support. The young people reflected that these decisions were

rarely rational and “often put them into a position where they had nothing at all.”

Incidence of NEETs in New Zealand

The most comprehensive mapping of the numbers and characteristics of NEETs in New Zealand has been carried out by the Ministry of Social Development (Hill, 2003). Using a number of cross-sectional and longitudinal measures, Hill has identified the following patterns of New Zealand NEETs:

- total numbers range from 26, 229 (10%) to 39,447 (15%), depending on the data source
- youth inactivity rates have fallen over recent years
- New Zealand’s figures are above those for comparable countries, probably due to our lower educational participation rates for 15-19 year-olds
- demographic patterns of this age cohort will probably mean an increase in the numbers of NEETs over the next decade
- groups with higher rates of inactivity include Maori, Pasifika, young women living with their children, young people living in one-parent families or without their parents and young people with disabilities, low or no qualifications, behavioural problems or those engaged in criminal activity
- slightly more women (16%) than men (14%) are inactive; the reverse is true when accounting for youth with children (most of whom are women)
- sources of personal income included unemployment benefit (27.5%), student allowance (7.7%), sickness benefit (6.9%), Domestic Purposes Benefit (6.5%); 36.3% had no source of income¹
- higher rates of incidence are found in the Far North, the central North Island and East Coast
- longitudinal data show that 29% of youth spent more than six months completely inactive between the ages of 16 and 21 and that one year after completing education, one fifth of youth were not yet engaged in full-time employment
- up to half of all young people aged 15-20 years have benefit contact and 40% of this group last over a year on a benefit; this group generates three-quarters of all weeks on benefits over this period

¹ Totals exceed 100% as categories are not mutually exclusive.

- 90% of all weeks on benefit by those aged 20-23 years are generated by youth who had benefit contact while aged 15-19 years
- the youth birth rate has been declining, but remains high compared to other countries; Maori have higher rates than non-Maori.

Another Ministry of Social Development report (McLaren, 2003) and data from a longitudinal study (Maloney, 2003) have further documented the adverse personal consequences of inactivity, including employment, earnings, reliance on social assistance, involvement in crime, early pregnancy, mental health, alcohol and drug abuse, suicide, homelessness and intergenerational inactivity. As one British study (Bynner & Parsons, 2002, p. 290) concluded,

... such young people often find themselves on the margins of the labour market, moving between various short-term unskilled jobs and unemployment; young women frequently exit early from the labour market to pursue the alternative route of motherhood. Apart from patchy employment prospects, subsequent consequences may include difficult relationships, lack of social and political participation, poor physical and mental health, drug abuse and criminality.

NEETs are also of interest in most OECD countries. The OECD (2000, p. 54) reports that the proportion of NEETs fell from 17% to 11% among 18 year-olds in OECD countries from 1984 to 1997 and 23% to 18% for 22 year-olds. The biggest improvement has been among young women, falling from 19% to 11% among 18 year-olds and 29% to 20% for 22 year-olds during this period.

At the macro level, one British study (Godfrey et al., 2002) has found there is also considerable financial cost for the community. Although they were not able to estimate all the cost of downstream effects in remedial programmes, health and crime, they calculated a minimum of approx. \$NZ150,000 in resource costs and \$NZ165,000 in public finance costs per NEET individual. Thus, if 10,000 NEETs were removed from the group by successful programmes, the net lifetime saving would be over \$1,500 million in resource costs and \$1,600 million in public finance costs. No comparable calculations are available for New Zealand.

NEET policy and programmes in New Zealand

In October 2002, the Government negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding with the Mayor's Taskforce, which included the goal, "By 2007, all 15 -19 year-olds will be engaged in appropriate education, training, work or other options which lead to a long-term economic independence and

well-being.”² In May 2004 the Government then announced that it would fund up to 14 transition service sites by 2007.

Historically, most New Zealand efforts aimed at NEETs have been school-based. The NZCER for example has documented and evaluated a range of innovative programs for ‘at-risk’ students in seven schools throughout New Zealand (Boyd & McDowall, 2002, 2003; Boyd, McDowall, & Cooper, 2002). While the authors stress that there is no single ‘magic bullet’ approach to ensuring successful transitions, they also concluded that there were a number of common features among the programmes they studied. In summary, the support offered was:

- embedded throughout the courses and within practical assessments
- provided in the context of a trusting relationship
- provided by the organisation of learning experiences related to individuals’ interests
- provided through informal, on-going individual discussions in class-time
- provided through whole-class discussions, activities and trips
- provided through life-skills or employment skill classes
- provided through work placements and contact with employers
- provided through contact with the tertiary environment
- enabled students to try out the theory learnt at school in the ‘real world’ (Boyd & McDowall, 2003, p. 14).

It is interesting to note however that the recent briefing paper for the incoming Minister of Education (2005, p. 60) concluded that “Achievement data from alternative programmes show extremely low rates of success for those under 16, suggesting that additional time spent at school is a better investment.”

More recently, there has also been a number of out-of-school transition programmes developed. The MSD has documented the work of three of these programmes, in Waitara, Whangarei and Christchurch (Family Child Youth and Community Unit, 2005). The report on these programme identified five key principles that were seen as critical to running a successful transition service:

- preventive approaches, reaching out to those most at risk, engaging before or shortly after leaving school

² <http://www.jobsletter.org.nz/mtfjobs/mtfjobs59.htm>

- empowerment of youth, operating in ways that validate youths' sense of dignity and self-worth
- interagency collaboration, based on clear understanding of each agency's roles, responsibilities and work practices
- building strong links with stakeholders using local networks to achieve credibility and provide services complementary to those already operating
- building knowledge about the site's work to inform current and future developments.

In addition, the report identified seven operational issues that this type of service needs to address:

- connecting with youth, including the importance of the physical location, visibility and awareness of its services among the target group
- targeting youth, by being clear who the service is specifically aimed at
- building links and developing collaborative relationships to establish credibility and community endorsement (including schools, training providers and employers)
- management of workloads at a realistic level and tailored to the specific context
- staffing the service with staff with appropriate qualities, skills and supervision
- strengths-based models, involving a holistic approach building on what strengths the youth have, rather than what they lack
- data collection to inform practice and form the basis for future planning and funding applications.

NEET programmes overseas

The MSD has also commissioned an international research literature review (ideally incorporate experimental and quasi-experimental methodologies) of 'what works' in labour market programmes (Higgins, 2003). The author concedes that these types of methodologies are often problematic and that there is considerable variation in the studies' findings. Notwithstanding these difficulties (common to most literature reviews in areas such as NEETs), the author provides a useful list of elements that are important for achieving long-term employment outcomes:

- training: needs to be intensive, long-term and pedagogically informed (resulting in young people becoming interested in learning)

- links to local labour markets: through local networking, training is linked to local demands and work placements and subsidies are in genuine jobs
- case management, support and mentoring: should be provided on an individual basis and recognise that a quick exit to the labour market is not always the best option for long-term outcomes
- 'ownership' of programmes by those involved: there needs to be high quality relationships between providers, local communities and local employer and worker organisations.

The genesis of the Project Y programme³

The genesis of the Project Y for NEETs in the Commuterville community arose initially out of the Mayors' Taskforce, when Council staff identified that there were significant numbers of youth in the area who were 'falling through the cracks' and not being recruited by conventional transition agencies.

Commuterville is seen as a high-need community, but the need is not evenly distributed. The town is perceived as two distinct communities, literally delineated by the railway tracks: one, a low-income area with large numbers of single parents dependent on benefits for their income and many long-term, multiple-generation unemployed and the other a high-income area, although not without its issues. Maori are disproportionately located in the former area, adding a strong ethnic element to these patterns of social inequality. Four gangs are active in the area, including two that are seen as recruitment mechanisms for the Mongrel Mob and Black Power. Interviewees report that the town has a high transience rate, with many people moving into the area (and also within the town) for the low rental costs relative to a nearby metropolitan area and also high out-migration numbers. Schools report that this high turnover rate makes it very difficult to accurately track students.

Commuterville District's youth inactivity rate (i.e. NEETs as a proportion of their age cohorts) is 18.9% and 15.5% of youth are on a benefit. These figures are both above the national average figures of 11.3% and 14.9% respectively (Hill, 2003, p. 62).

The intention with the Project Y programme was to develop a local solution in association with other key government agencies and local networks. The project was planned as a joint initiative between the government department responsible for employment issues, the Commuterville District Council, the

³ Project Y and Commuterville are fictionalized names to protect confidentiality.

Tertiary Education Commission that funds tertiary provisions, local youth providers, local business providers and the local high schools.

The original aim was “to achieve a sustainable employment and/or training destination for each youth, which is supported through mentoring for up to 12 months post-emplacment.” The aim was to transition at least 40 youth from an estimated 50 youth who have left school with low qualifications and/or no destination. These youth are expected to achieve destinations of employment, employment-related training, apprenticeships or pre-apprenticeships over a 12 month period.”

Project Y started with a single Youth Transitions Specialist and a second worker was added five months later. The project was overseen by a management group involving representatives from the funding bodies and one of the local high schools, although the latter did not eventuate.

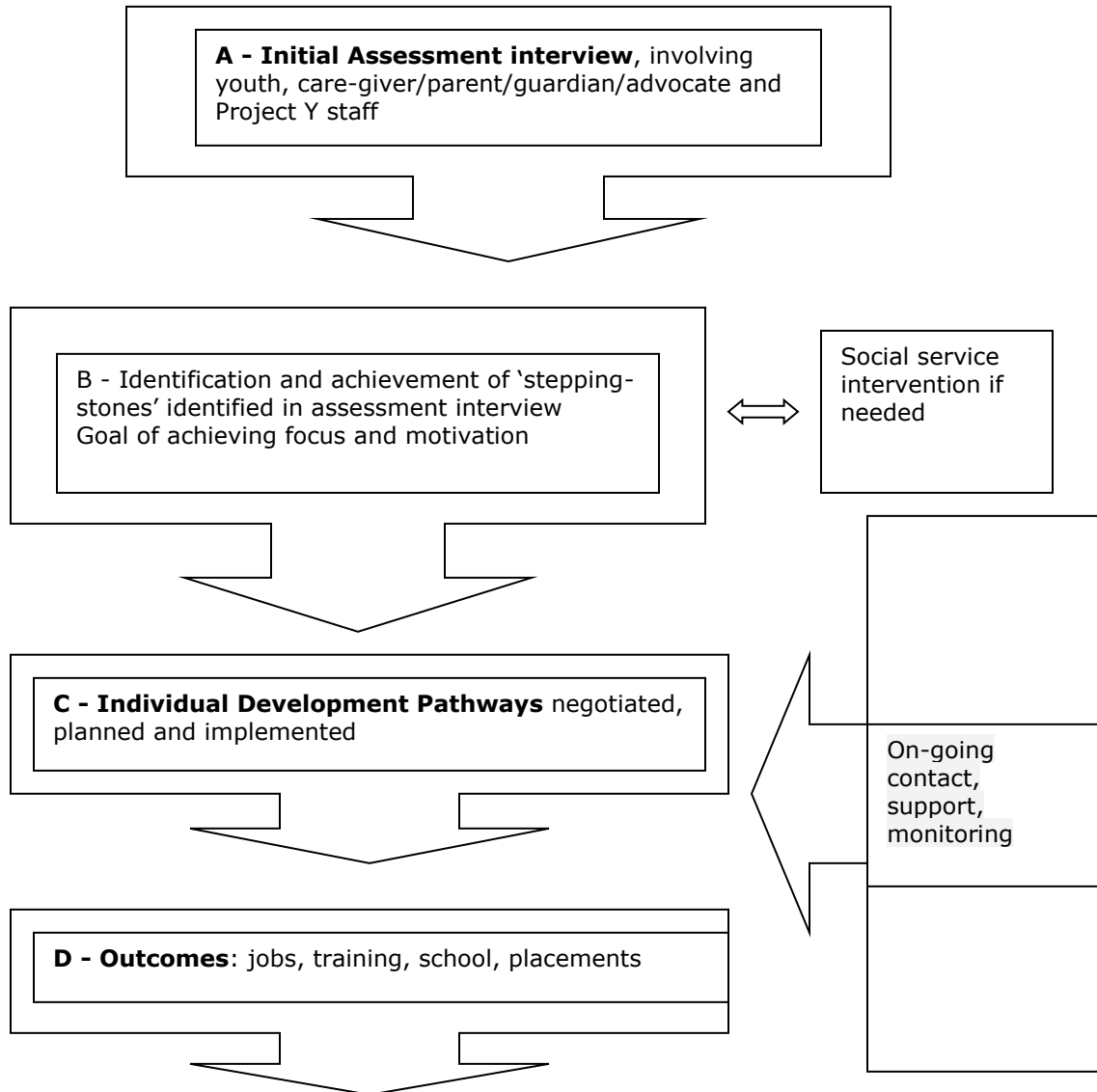
Evaluation aims and methodology

The Project Y evaluation was commissioned by the Steering Committee of the Project Y Programme with funding by the Commuterville District Council and aimed to document how the programme had been developed and what has been learned in the process as well as recording and analysing the impact of the programme for the participants.

The evaluative data was gathered primarily from interviews (most were done face-to-face except for the employers and two others who were interviewed by phone), project records and some other data sources, such as project records. A total of 28 interviews were carried out a range of stakeholders involved with all aspects of the project.

Project Y – the process

The interviews with the Project Y workers identified the following steps in their programme (0).

Figure 1- Project Y Programme Model

Step A (Initial Assessment): this process is important in establishing the youth's goals and the means to achieve them. Throughout this process, the workers emphasised the need to closely involve the youth's parents or care-givers. As one of the project workers said, "If you don't get the parents involved, then it's going to be much harder to get outcomes in the long run."

Step B (Identification and Achievement of Stepping-stones): the 'stepping-stones' are all the elements that prevent or hinder the achievement of longer-term goals. They include opening a bank account, getting an Inland Revenue Department number, obtaining a birth certificate, completing legal requirements such as court appearances and probably the most valuable one, obtaining a driver's licence if possible.

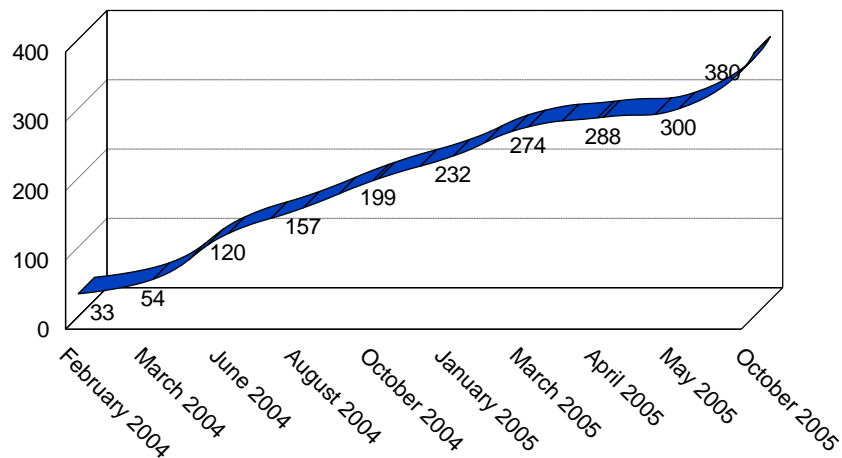
Step C (Individual Development Pathways): once the initial assessment has been completed and the various stepping-stones identified and rectified, the Project Y staff are then able to negotiate and plan what options are possible with the youth. This may require some form of short-term training programme (most often in literacy and numeracy), before seeking employment outcomes (**Step D – Outcomes**).

There is considerable stress placed on the importance of on-going contact to monitor progress in conjunction with support and/or cajoling where necessary. Employers and training providers are encouraged to contact Project Y at the first sign of any difficulties, especially non-attendance. This 'red flag' process enables the Project Y staff to follow up on issues before they magnify or become too difficult to resolve.

Project Y programme participants

Within three months of the project starting, the first Project Y worker achieved the original goal of 50 participants and by the end of the first year, this total had exceeded 200, four times the original goal (0 below). By October 2005, a total of 380 young people have been involved in the programme, a figure well in excess of what was originally calculated as the possible target number.

Figure 2 - Total number of Project Y participants, February 2004 – October 2005

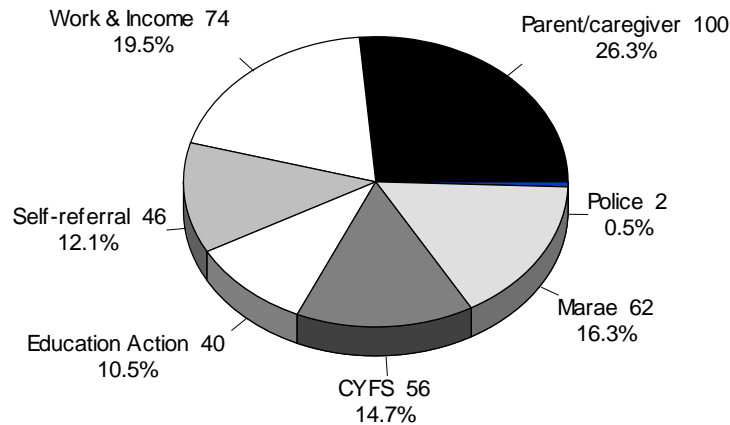


It is notable for a transition programme that the most frequent source (over a quarter) of referrals for the programme have come from parents or caregivers (Figure 3 below), followed by Work and Income (19.5%),

Commuterville Marae⁴ (16.3%), Child, Youth and Family Service (CYFS) (14.7%), self-referral (12.1%) and Education Action (a local private training provider – 10.5%). There is a notable lack of referrals from the Police (2: .5%), schools or other justice agencies, which would normally be expected to be significant referral sources in such a programme.

The high proportion of referrals from parents and the young people themselves points to a strong 'word-of-mouth' recruitment process and reflects a high level of credibility and acceptance among the Commuterville community. The staff also report that it reflects a growing number of parents who feel that they have simply 'run out of options' in dealing with their children's difficulties and behaviour. Project Y staff also stressed the value of articles in the local newspaper in particular for raising awareness of the programme among parents.

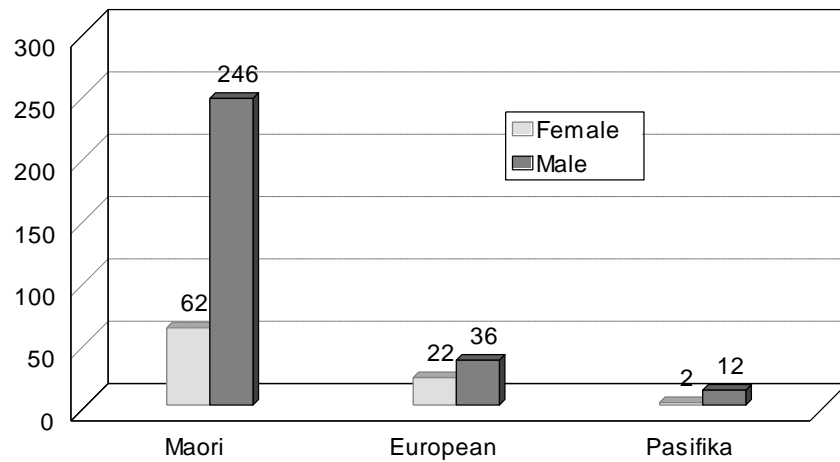
Figure 3 - Referral sources of Project Y participants, February 2004 – October 2005



The participants are predominantly male (Figure 4 below) and overwhelmingly Maori. These proportions reflect both the high numbers of Maori in the Commuterville population and the high proportion of Maori youth in national NEET statistics reviewed earlier in this article.

⁴ The local Maori community centre.

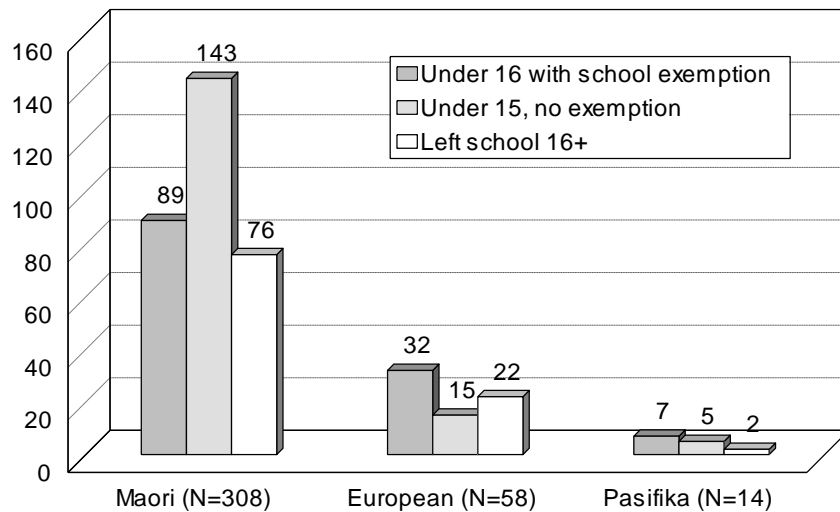
Figure 4 - Project Y participants by gender and ethnicity, February 2004 – October 2005



Project Y is catering predominantly for young people who have left school before the official leaving age of 16 (192: 74% - Figure 5 below). Furthermore, a large proportion of the participants (163: 43%) do not have school exemptions⁵ and therefore only a small proportion (188: 26%) have come through the more 'conventional' route of having left school at 16. The number of Maori participants under 16 years without an exemption is particularly noteworthy. Project Y staff report that they have worked with a considerable number of youths under 16 years who have apparently been out of school more than two years and were not under any other agencies' jurisdiction.

⁵ A breakdown of the ages of these participants was not available. Commuterville High School does not grant exemptions for pupils younger than 15½ years.

Figure 5 - School-leaving status of Project Y participants by ethnicity, February 2004 – October 2005



Evidence of Youthworks' impact

In addition to the total numbers of participants involved in Project Y detailed above, there is good project documentation (also confirmed in the evaluation interviews) of a very high rate of outcomes being achieved in the programme. In addition to the data on these outcomes detailed below, some individual case studies (taken from the Transition Specialists' reports) have been included in the shaded boxes to illustrate how these impacts affect individuals' lives.⁶

A is a young 17 year old who was referred to the Youth Transitions project via a local high school. She has been formally warned by for her lack of attendance and was certainly facing expulsion.

A meeting was attended by [Project Y worker] and a senior school teacher to discuss issues surrounding their student A. It became very apparent that her lack of attendance to school very much reflected her attitude when she was attending, which was aggressive and disruptive. The school felt it had limited options as to the action they needed to take regarding these issues and that expulsion was imminent if things did not improve.

A meeting was then arranged at school between the student, A and [Project Y worker]. A had much to say, she expressed that the school had betrayed her. After a 90 minute meeting it became very apparent that this young lady had many problems with her personal life that were very much affecting her ability to cope with school or

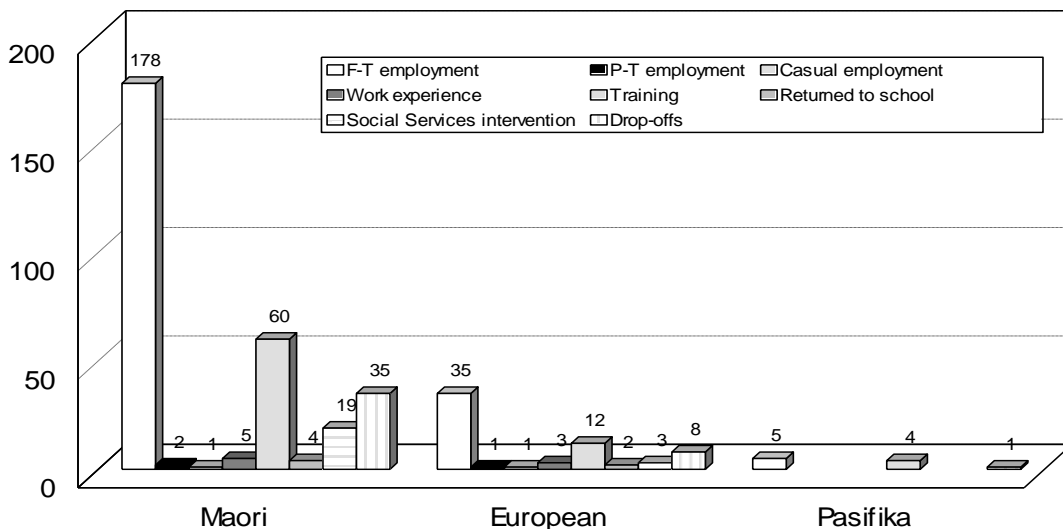
⁶ Minor editing changes have been made to protect people's anonymity.

anything. **A** has experienced huge family breakdowns, which a year ago had meant that she was unable to live with the family home and therefore applied for Independent Youth Benefit through Work and Income so that she could go and live with friends but continue her schooling. With the huge pressure of living expenses rent, food, power, transport and lack of family support. **A** was not coping very well at all. She was alone, broke and very sad, which led her to missing school repeatedly.

After identifying all the issues [Project Y worker] then began a plan. The first priority was to re-locate her back to Commuterville area in order to make it more practical for her to attend school. With the help of a real estate agent [Project Y worker] was able to secure **A** a place of abode where all expenses were incorporated into weekly rent, which were a lot cheaper than her previous address and was within walking distance of her school, [Project Y worker] has also ensured that she was receiving full and all entitlements that are available on the Independent Youth Benefit. **A** is doing extremely well; [Project Y worker] attends appointments with her every fortnight at school to ensure attendance is kept up and that her personal affairs are manageable. **A** has only had three days off in the last month, and she has supplied [Project Y worker] with a doctor's certificate covering these days.

Figure 6 below summarises the main outcomes for the Project Y participants since it started. The results are notable for the high proportion of full-time jobs secured, training programmes undertaken and the low numbers of withdrawals for a programme of this type. Outcomes are approximately proportional for each of the ethnic groups. Only a small number of the referrals have returned to school following a Project Y assessment interview.

Figure 6 - Outcomes of Project Y participants by ethnicity, February 2004 – October 2005



Several interviewees commented that it is not only the sheer number of youths recruited by the programme, but that it was notable for succeeding with what one interviewee described as "some of the hardest-nut kids around the place."

***B** is a 16 year old Maori youth. He was referred to the Youth Transitions project via the Commuterville Marae. **B** had left school at the age of 15; he had not been exempted he just choose not to attend as he felt school was extremely unfair to him. After a discussion with **B** and a Commuterville Marae representative [Project Y worker] had identified a family breakdown that had led to **B** and his mother living in a local caravan park. He had also become very well known to the police and did have pending court cases to deal with through the Youth court.*

***B** was a very pleasant young man who needed to work on his appearance and hygiene as a starting point. [Project Y worker] secured **B** appropriate products for his personal hygiene and also assisted him with the appropriate clothing. He also required Birth Certificate and IRD number, which [Project Y worker] has organised. He proved to be very reliable when requested to attend appointments with [Project Y worker] and always appeared on time and now always well presented and clean. He was informed also by [Project Y worker] that love bites all over his neck were also not acceptable within this programme and that appearance and self-respect were paramount. Once all documents were obtained and reliability had been proven **B** began employment immediately with a local waste management business, where he is doing very well, earning a reasonable wage, increasing his health and fitness and contributing to his mother's bills and outgoings.*

Due to the positive response from her son to this project and the extra financial assistance from her son, this family have chosen to move out of the caravan in order to move to a more safe and positive environment. The project worker is assisting the mother with possible employment options as well.

Feedback from employers

Feedback was sought from a random selection of nine employers who have had placements from Project Y over the past two years. The number of placements per employer has ranged from one to twelve, with an average of 4.4 placements. Overall, these employers rated their experiences with the Project Y staff and the youths very positively. Several of the employers also reported some negative experiences with the placements, but these experiences were almost all due to issues with the young people themselves or their circumstances and not the Project Y programme or its staff – in several cases, the employers were quick to add that the issues occurred despite the best efforts of the Project Y staff.

Most of the employers interviewed commented on how difficult the Project Y participants were to work with and that the success of the programme was due to the skills and dedication of the Project Y staff.

While all the employers agreed that the work subsidy they received from Work and Income was essential because of the time needed to get the

youths 'up to speed' with basic work habits and skills, their assessments of the adequacy of the subsidy were mixed. Most rated it as 'adequate', but several said that it did not really match the amount of time and supervision needed to get employees to a productive stage.

Most had very positive accounts of how the placements had worked out, with about half of the placements ending up in un-subsidised, full-time jobs with the companies. The cases that didn't work successfully usually involved the youths failing to turn up for work, often after apparently positive experiences for periods of up to several months

Then one day, he just didn't show up. He was earning good money up to \$23 an hour and he simply disappeared for a couple of months. Then he turned up again, expecting his job back, but I can't run a business on that basis, you know?

There was very positive feedback about the value of the Project Y staff keeping in touch (either by visits or phone) with the placements, and in many cases ensuring that placements were followed up when they were absent. "They go round there and pull them out of bed if they have to – they're great."

Another common comment was on the difficult situations that many of the young people came from.

The kids themselves, they're doing all right, they start to believe they can really hold down a job, but then Dad takes his pay one week and spends it all down at the boozier. I mean, that's pretty disheartening for anyone and not much that we can all do about it really.

All of the employer interviewees reported that they found the Project Y staff very professional in their contacts and rated their achievements very highly – "the programme is just great and it's largely due to how they go about it." A specific attribute of the staff's approach mentioned was how they "keep it real."

We had one guy who disappeared for a while and then turned up again, but we told him he had to go and see [workers] before we would. So they talked to him and got him all sorted and then he came back.

C is a 16 year old Maori youth who was a referral through Child Youth and Family. He left school at the age of 13 due to behavioural problems. There was no school exemption obtained; he simply did not attend school. C is the eldest of five children living at home with his mother. He became well known to the local police due to a number of minor incidents, which resulted in Child Youth and Family being involved. C was an absolute sour individual when we first met with his mother. He lacked

respect for others, respect for himself, along with confidence, motivation and direction.

Upon introducing the programme to him, I had a very earnest conversation with this young man about his attitude and his appearance. I expressed to him that I am in a position to help him a better future but that this programme is a two way street, where I have expectations of him and his mum in order for him, to move forward. A follow up appointment was arranged where I clearly pointed out to him to leave his black glasses, his black beanie and gang colours at home. He needed a shower, to comb his hair and wear appropriate clothing and to pick his chin off the ground. It appeared to be a very long time since someone had laid the law own to this young man and that he needed to realise that life is what you make it. Two days later he attended his appointment, 30 minutes early, washed and groomed, and most of all he had a SMILE. His first words to me were "I'm ready, Sir."

Since our last meeting he has also caught up with some mates who I had already assisted through the programme and they had told him that I had secured them employment and many other things they achieve within the programme so C was in no time attending employment interviews within the building industry. After his second interview he was successful. He continues to do very well, both at work and within the home.

Other programme impacts

Although the prime interest of a programme such as Project Y is on the effects it has on its participants, it also has broader 'ripple' effects beyond them as individuals.

Work and Income staff reported 'knock-on' effects for their agency where the programme helped promote a two-way linking of parents to their services as a result of the youths' involvement in the Project Y programme. This linking increased their 'follow-through' with the parents in relation to benefit entitlements and ensuring links with other government agencies such as Housing New Zealand.

Another effect they reported was that Project Y has "challenged our thinking as a centre in relation to young people" and has "made social workers' jobs easier" by providing access into families in need following the involvement of young people in the programme. Other agencies' staff also commented on the value of having a programme such as Project Y in carrying out their own work - "[Project Y worker] is a real lifeline for us."

Youthworks' key features

From reviewing the project documentation and the interviews conducted for this evaluation, it is clear that Project Y is a distinctive programme in a

number of ways. The key features that appear to underpin its effectiveness as a transition programme are summarised below under a number of headings.

Staff qualities

Probably the strongest comments were made about the compassion and especially the commitment of the project staff

- The fact that both of the workers are Maori which aligns well with the fact that 78% of those who have gone through the programme are Maori
- The combination of having a male/female combination was also seen as valuable for dealing with some situations involving gender issues such as sexual abuse
- 'Going the extra mile' for the participants when the need arises, ensuring that issues such as court appearance are resolved, which enables the young people to get their lives sorted out in order to get some stability and focus for achieving their goals.

Project Y staff's skills

- Being able to readily communicate to both the youths and their parents
- The ability to establish, maintain and utilise extensive networks among local employers.

The programme process

- Providing strong, on-going support and follow-through with all parts of the programme
- The identification and resolving of 'stepping-stones' as pre-requisites to achieving subsequent steps of the programme
- Providing a range of options for the participants, then setting goals and providing clear directions and focus to achieve them
- A recognition of the importance of addressing literacy and numeracy skills in order to gain longer-term outcomes
- A strong commitment by the project workers to involve parents throughout the interview process and placements (having a large number of referrals from parents and the youths themselves - indicating some degree of motivation - probably increases the likelihood of gaining longer-term outcomes)
- A close and well-co-ordinated relationship with a local PTE to provide literacy and numeracy tuition.

Project Y employees' work structures

- Autonomy of workers, giving them latitude to adapt their strategies to individual circumstances
- Having programme staff as Work and Income internal appointments, many of the issues associated with short-term contracts such as constantly having to apply for continuation of funding are avoided.

The community

- Commuterville as a distinct geographical community has probably made it easier to get buy-in from employers and other key agencies
- Close links with Work and Income that helps identify youth in need of the programme, but also helps link their families into services and supports needed.

Issues

As with all programmes, a number of issues have been identified in the course of this evaluation. The main ones include (in approximate order of importance):

- The potential burnout of very committed staff and a feeling of becoming too dependent on the specific individual workers (now reported to be largely resolved)
- A lack of co-ordination and awareness between agencies involved with NEETs
- The low degree of involvement of the high schools, especially given that they were originally intended to be an integral part of the programme; it is highly unusual for schools not to be involved in transition programmes
- The large numbers of under-age non-exemptions in Commuterville
- participants' reliability of attendance in work placements and training programmes; lack of funding available to provide follow-up in these situations
- Unnecessary pressure to place participants into jobs, resulting in placements into low-skill, low-pay jobs, rather than putting them through some training and enabling them to then being able to access higher-skill jobs
- A lack of appropriate training alternatives in the community to increase options for trainees
- Project Y management group is seen as somewhat detached, not meeting sufficiently and not altogether clear about future directions

- Dealing with multi-generational families who have a multiplicity of problems (e.g. budgeting and parenting issues) often impeding youths participants' progress in the programme
- On-going tension for the programme of not unduly attracting students out of schools, while still offering positive alternatives for the students; Project Y is 'hoisted on its own petard' in some senses because as a successful programme it will inevitably attract disaffected school students, but if it is not perceived as attractive it is unlikely to be a successful programme – a dilemma that might be resolved to some degree by closer liaison with the schools.

Possible improvements to Youthworks

In the light of suggestions made in the course of the evaluation and the foregoing discussion of findings, the following recommendations are made with a view to further improving what is clearly a very successful programme.

- There were a number of strong recommendations from different sources that a single assessment agency be developed with a central location in the Commuterville shopping area. The centre would be responsible for doing individual needs analyses and act as a hub to all the agencies working in this area. It was acknowledge that it would be difficult working out funding and management, but these issues could probably be resolved better by further extending the present Project Y programme and then devise a pilot programme based on what is learnt in this process. A central site would enable easier access for both youths and parents.
- There was a call for the programme to "go to another level," especially in relation to improving life skills and using training programmes to achieve higher levels of skills for the participants.
- Better liaison and co-ordination between other agencies working in transition and especially involving the local high schools (one person said the "present setup is pretty disjointed, with everyone having their own philosophy and agenda"); a number of interviewees mentioned the value of the meeting that took place in September between the Ministry of Education, truancy services, social worker, PTEs, marae worker and Youthworks, which is planned to be repeated quarterly in the future.
- In achieving 'stepping-stones' for participants, greater emphasis could be placed on getting driver's licences; employers in particular identified licences as a key to achieving good long-term employment outcomes.

- Improved database records to enable better analysis of issues and participation patterns.

Discussion

The transition from compulsory schooling into the adult world of education and work is an important part of every young person's life cycle. Made successfully, it greatly increases the likelihood of positive long-term outcomes; made poorly, it greatly increases the likelihood of poor life chances and limited lifestyles. While most young people find this transition period challenging, it is especially so for those who leave school with few or no qualifications, and even more so for those who leave before the compulsory leaving age of 16 years. Without entry qualifications and limited life experience, these young people find it difficult to gain entry into tertiary education or skilled occupations, leaving them competing for diminishing numbers of unskilled jobs or dependent on state benefits.

Despite the considerable reforms and new initiatives and their success in reducing the numbers of school-leavers with no qualifications, there is still a substantial number of young people who fail to make this transition successfully. In New Zealand this number is about 10-15% of each age cohort – up to 40,000 of 15-19 year-olds at present. This group are disproportionately represented in crime, health and social welfare statistics for periods well beyond this life stage.

Programmes that help these NEETs into post-school training and jobs are therefore important in improving these young people's life chances and reducing long-term costs for the wider community. NEETs are an extremely challenging group to achieve positive outcomes with; they are essentially the net results of schools' failings and they invariably come from difficult home circumstances where they are often the second or even third generation of family members who are unqualified and unemployed.

The Commuterville Project Y therefore warrants particular attention. Based in a high-need community, the project has been extremely successful in not only recruiting high numbers of NEETs (well in excess of the original goals and the majority of whom are under the school-leaving age and often without official exemption) and achieving a very high rate of placement into either training (often literacy and numeracy programmes) or full-time jobs. The programme has had a very low drop-out rate in the two years it has been running. The feedback from those who work with the project staff and its clients rate it very positively, confirming the project's outcome data.

Identifying why a programme is successful is not always straightforward. However feedback in this evaluation points to a number of elements that people feel accounts for its success. They include the commitment and interpersonal skills of the project staff, their affinity with the client group, skilful use of extensive local networks, providing on-going support beyond initial placements, ensuring that participants have 'stepping-stones' that enable them to function as independent individuals, addressing literacy and numeracy needs, involvement of parents/caregivers and appropriate management structures that provide autonomy and support.

As with all transition programmes, Project Y still has issues to resolve to further improve its effectiveness. The most prominent of these include avoiding worker burn-out, the need to improve cross-agency liaison (especially with the schools) and the need to work towards placing participants in jobs involving a higher level of skills, especially in conjunction with more sustained training programmes.

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