



# MONASH University

## **HOW DO SCHOOL EXPERIENCES RELATE TO OFFENDING BEHAVIOUR FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG MALE OFFENDERS?**

**Thesis submitted by**

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my sister

Loretta Alice Lester

August 20, 1954 – September 9, 2015

Our life was shared in so many ways

## **ABSTRACT**

The lived school experiences of young males aged 16 to 21, and how these experiences may have influenced a trajectory into pro-criminal behaviour, is the subject of this qualitative study. Past and current literature primarily presents the views of researchers and others. The expert opinion of the young person is generally not sought. Thematic analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews with participants from African, Maori Pacific Island and Australian descent reveal several key domains of risk within the school environment including: problem behaviour, low academic achievement, negative peer influence, involvement in bullying (victim and/or perpetrator), and illicit substance use. For several young males, the onset of behavioural problems occurred during primary school. Identified risk factors outside of the school environment demonstrate that many were predisposed to school failure. Conflict and violence within the family home, neighbourhood pro-criminal peer influence along with estrangement from school were precursors to crime. Negative interaction with the police exacerbated the problem. The post-school experience of these young males suggests barriers to opportunity and the need for early intervention to accommodate the needs of young males at risk of offending behaviour. Participants identified several protective factors to sustain engagement with the school system that included, supportive and understanding teachers, sports activities and the provision of counselling. The aim of the study was to capture the thoughts and feelings of these young males with the firm belief that their expert opinions will add to the knowledge base. Focus groups with adult representatives from schools and youth services were conducted following the interviews to comment on, and reinforce, the findings.

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

AACY	Australian Alliance for Children and Youth
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACARA	Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AIC	Australian Institute of Criminology
AUSPELD	Australian Federation of Specific Learning Difficulty Associations
ALDA	The Australian Learning Difficulty Association
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorders
BEST	Behavioural and Educational Support Teams
CBT	Cognitive Behaviour Therapy
CMY	Centre for Multicultural Youth
CTC	Communities that Care
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services
DDOLL	Developmental Disorders of language and Literacy
ECA	Early Childhood Australia
EDMR	Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing
ESL	Early School Leavers
EST	Emotional Security Theory

ESMH	Expanded School Mental Health (USA)
fMRI	functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging
GLM	Good Lives Model
HDR	Higher Degree by Research
LDA	Learning Difficulties Australia
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NATSEM	National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling
NITL	National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy
NIFTeY	National Investment for the Early Years
NMT	Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	International Program for Student Assessment
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
QERC	Quality of Education Review Committee
RNR	Risk Need Responsivity
SBHC	School-Based Health Clinic (USA)
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)
UK	United Kingdom

USA	United States America
WHO	World Health Organisation
VCHWS	Victorian Child Health and Wellbeing Survey
YOPP	Young Offender Pilot Program
YOT	Youth Offending Team (UK)

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## **STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY**

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledge in the text and a list of references is given.

Catherine Powell

Date: 23 November 2017



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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

The vast expanse of literature and research on young offenders' experiences of school and how those experiences may have influenced a trajectory into pro-criminal behaviour is gleaned from the views of practitioners or researchers, not the young people themselves. A considerable number of studies identify a clear relationship between school difficulties, early school departure and the trajectory into anti-social and criminal behaviour. This research study explores those experiences from the perspective of the study participants, young males aged 16 to 21 who are, or were, involved with the justice system.

### **Sections 1-7**

#### **1.1 Background to the research**

Despite a decline in youth offending in Australia 2008-09 to 2015-16, except for illicit drug offences, which almost doubled, and sexual assault and related offences (ABS 2016), the financial costs to the community of youth offending is high. The Productivity Commission 2013 cites a rise from 350(\$m) in 2001-02 to 640(\$m) in 2011-12 (Smith et al. 2014, p. 60). The pathway from summary, community-based offending to more serious offending that results in custodial orders, further exacerbates these costs. For instance, in February 2011, the Western Australian Auditor General estimated that in 2008 it cost the state \$100 million dollars to manage 250 juvenile offenders aged 10 - 17 years. This equates to \$400,000 per child (Papalia 2011).

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2011) report covering the period 2008-2009, states that in each year for youth aged 10-17 years, 69,000 juveniles were charged by the police, 35,000 presented to the Children's Courts, 14,500 were supervised by juvenile justice agencies, and 6,000 resulted in detention. Young males significantly outnumbered their young female counterparts, in some cases by 90 percent. Of increasing concern is the entry of young people aged 10 years into the system and the overrepresentation of Indigenous youth, particularly those aged 10 - 12 years. Overall, however, the 2008-2009 statistics demonstrate that less than 3 percent of Australian youth are charged by the police and 0.2 percent were detained. This trend is consistent with statistics detailed by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) (Taylor 2007) which report that from 1981 to 2007 rates of detention have decreased by 51 percent.

Despite a rise internationally in youth offending in the 1990's, except for the United States America (USA) (World Youth Report 2003), recent international data out of the USA and the United Kingdom (UK) shows that youth crime is declining (National Centre for Juvenile Justice 2017; Ministry of Justice 2015).

The pathway from childhood to successful adulthood is intrinsically linked to the attainment of necessary developmental milestones. Although there are individual factors that lead to youth offending, it is well recognised that there are shared characteristics that can influence a young person's predisposition to criminality. One Australian study (Halsey 2008) that initially undertook 100, and later 50, in-depth interviews with young male offenders aged 15 to 23 years, reported issues related to family conflict, poor literacy and numeracy levels. Most participants were expelled from school prior to Year 10. Murray and Farrington (2010) support these findings and summarise risk factors under the headings of individual, family and social. It is evident from these studies that when there are large gaps in either one or more of these domains, a concerning conduit into anti-social behaviour and criminal activity can emerge.

One domain, which the research supports, influencing the development of offending behaviour in young people, is their educational experience (Ashkar & Kenny 2009). While studies have examined this from the view of factors such as socioeconomic status, language proficiency and learning disabilities (Review of Funding for Schooling Final Report 2011), known as the 'Gonski Report', there is a void of published studies that have examined how school experiences have contributed to offending behaviour from the perspective of young male offenders. Scholars agree that it is rare that young peoples' voices are heard across a range of topics, for example, perceptions of school (Ashkar & Kenny 2009); perspectives on their literacy and communication skills (Hopkins, Clegg & Stackhouse 2016); perceived barriers around developmental risk and protective factors (Barnert et al. 2015; Cornell et al. 2013; Unruh; Povenmire-Kirk & Yamamoto 2009). The aim of this study is to elicit the views of the study participants to investigate their perceptions of the lived school experience and how that may have influenced a trajectory into pro-criminal behaviour. Their voice, insight and recommendations are crucial to the implementation of successful interventions.

This research is important as there is a need for school policy makers, administrators, and others in the field, to be cognisant of, and have some understanding of, the viewpoints of the young offenders. This knowledge will assist in the identification of vulnerable, 'at risk' young males in order that their perceptions, opinions and experiences are included in the academic debate and responded to appropriately. It may also help alleviate the anxiety, fear and apprehension experienced by many people working in the sector who deal with this group of young people.

## **1.2 School experience**

The relationship between youth offending and deficits in academic learning and performance and/or attention deficits is well established (Snow & Powell 2008; Snow & Powell 2005). The pathway to successful adulthood is dependent upon the attainment of necessary developmental landmarks, supported primarily by socialisation within the family unit and subsequently enhanced by the experiences of education. When one or both socialising domains fail to meet the specific developmental needs of the child, a concerning pathway into anti-social behavior and criminal activity can emerge.

The English writer and social commentator, G. K. Chesterton, referenced education as '... the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.' It could be argued that learning, whether institutionally based or less formally culturally constructed, supports and assists the development of personal identity and social wellbeing for all individuals.

Because schools, like families, are important socialising agents, they can also be an important factor in the development of offending behaviour. For example, when bonding with the school system does not occur, students may fail to achieve, form negative peer associations and eventually slide into delinquent behaviour (Ashkar & Kenny 2009; Farrington 2005; Welsh 2001). Furthermore, as noted by Cohen (1955 cited in Lowe, May & Elrod 2008, p. 345), in a discussion related to strain theory, institutions, including schools, primarily conform to middle-class expectations.

When students feel disconnected and fail to bond with the school system, exclusion either institutionally instigated or self-instigated, is a likely outcome (Ashkar & Kenny 2009). It is suggested that early school leavers are one of the most disadvantaged groups in society. Furthermore, they are more likely to come from low socio-economic backgrounds, become

unemployed and long-term unemployed, and continue a cycle of disadvantage for themselves and their children (National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM), 1999). Children born into families that experience a range of multiple and complex problems associated with homelessness, substance abuse and family violence are particularly vulnerable to poor developmental outcomes (Bromfield et al. 2010). One could argue that, without the boundaries of a structured home environment and a supportive and functioning school environment, the pathway into anti-social behavior and criminality is probable.

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of these young males and contribute to increased knowledge in this area.

### **1.3 The predisposition of young males to offending behaviour**

In Australia, juvenile justice comes under the states and territories responsibility. However, the states vary in what is considered the age of a juvenile. The average age is 10-17 years. In Queensland the age is 10-16 years, while in Victoria the age rises to 18 years. Additionally, Victoria has a dual track system for young offenders who present to the adult court aged 18 - 21 years and are deemed suitable for detention within a youth justice facility.

When comparing Australian youth crime with international research, a benchmark was set at the Seventh United Nations (UN) Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, held in Beijing China in 1984, at which time the UN endorsed the 'Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice' (Winterdyk 2002). In 1998, the Beijing Rules were incorporated into the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of a Child. However, as reported by Winterdyk (2002, p. 12) 'not only are there variations between countries but even within countries'. For example, in Canada, the age of responsibility is from 12-18 years, yet provinces, like states and territories in Australia vary. By contrast, troubled youth in Denmark are referred to a social worker, given that there are no special courts for minors, except for extremely serious offences, such as murder.

### **1.4 The researcher's position**

The writer has over 20 years' experience in direct social work practice, working within custodial and community forensic youth facilities, and for the past 12 years operating in private practice as

a mental health social worker, providing: assessment, counselling, family mediation, groupwork and social casework to a range of clients including young offenders. She has been involved in several research projects related to vulnerable young people within the justice system. In 2012, she undertook semi-structured and focus group interviews with young offenders and staff across youth custodial services in Victoria, including thematic analysis of the data and reporting on the findings. Her experience of working with young offenders, including an analysis of the research, has led to an awareness of the relationship between low academic achievement, exclusion from school and the onset of antisocial and pro-criminal behavior. This study focuses on the voices, and lived experiences of the educational system, of these young males.

The researcher's opinion and professional identity is embodied within a critical theory perspective. Over the past decade, in advanced liberal societies there has been a shift in the social, political and economic relations from the 'old penology' which was informed by an ethos of social justice, linking crime to the elimination of poverty and socio-economic deprivation to a new industry of 'evidence-based programs' in which the individual is depicted as a rational, responsible, decision maker (Gray 2005; McGuire 2002). The research reports that a large proportion of young offenders have a history of severe socio-economic disadvantage resulting in social exclusion and are therefore unable to fully partake in society's social, economic and political arena (MacDonald & Marsh 2001). A movement towards Restorative Justice principles fits well with the new liberalism in that there is an expectation of rehabilitation. However, Raynor (2001 cited in Gray 2005 p. 941) argues that the 'concept of reintegrating socially excluded young offenders into mainstream community life is something of a misnomer in that most were never integrated to begin with' (Gray 2005 p.941).

The research aims to give a voice to this population. Freire (1968) describes a 'culture of silence' of those disadvantaged, embedded within the 'economic, social and political' domain (Ramos (ed.) 2005, p. 30). It can be argued that the problem is seen within the current paradigm of individual pathology (maladaptive attitudes, behaviour and cognitive skills), and that policy makers have chosen a narrow interpretation of the 'what works' research evidence and, therefore, there is lack of clarity around assessed risks and needs modalities (Hannah-Moffat 1999).

There were defining moments that occurred in the researcher's practice that contributed to a consciousness raising and awareness of the acute psycho-social deficits experienced by young offenders with limited education, and how this in turn had impacted on their self-esteem, personal development and life opportunity. A key aim therefore of this study is to see if there is a relationship between school experiences and anti-social and criminal behaviour in young adult males.

### **1.5 The importance and efficacy of the study**

The essential premise of this study is that responsible practice needs to be founded on sound theoretical knowledge, and furthermore, that small systematic studies like this one, will help build this tested knowledge (Turner 1996).

Contrary to the 'new penology' that underlies the 'what works' principles (Gray 2005, p. 938), young males who have been excluded from mainstream education and found themselves in trouble with the law are not necessarily 'rational, responsible decision makers' (Gray 2005, p. 938). Disempowerment and systems outside of their control often dictate their direction in life. If given the choice, they might like to have a voice but the opportunity to express issues and concerns is rarely made available. Ashkar and Kenny (2009) in Australia and Welsh (2001) in the USA, undertook reviews of the literature and commented on the absence of studies that enquire into the perceptions of young people about their school experiences and the related family-school mesosystem, and how these have influenced their offending behaviour. The research reported on in this thesis focuses on this issue.

If systems and processes within the school environment can engage 'at risk' students and divert them from a criminal lifestyle, society will benefit. A longitudinal study published by Kjellstrand & Eddy (2011) found that, from 1980 until the present, the number of imprisoned adults in the US has quadrupled from 320,000 to nearly 1,420,000. We could argue for more prisons as deterrence. However, it is noted by Lipsey, Howell & Kelly (2010, p. 12) that punitive forms of treatment such as correctional facilities '...on average have no effect on recidivism and may actually increase it'.

The aim of this research is to develop knowledge via the young participants' rich descriptive responses. From a broader standpoint, their contribution should raise awareness of how to assist

and support children at the early stages of education. Furthermore, as suggested by Gilmore (2001 cited in Nellis 2002, p. 435) the ‘autobiography offers an opportunity to experiment with becoming a person’ and taps into the humanity of offenders by providing a basis for therapeutic intervention. Additionally, from the researcher’s professional identity as a social worker, the ‘user perspective’ modality sits with empowerment of the client and is envisaged as an important component of the academic debate.

The thesis therefore will focus on the following question:

What do young people’s insights tell us about the association between school experience and pro-criminal behaviour?

## **1.6 The structure of the thesis**

This thesis is divided into the following chapters and chapter sections.

Chapter One introduces the research study and provides background to the research drawing on the author’s knowledge and experience of working with young people within a forensic setting. The importance and efficacy of the study is also discussed.

Chapter Two presents Australian and international literature on the relationship between school experiences and pro-criminal behaviour, experiences outside the classroom, risk and protective factors, stages of transition and the trajectory into substance abuse and criminal activity. The chapter also covers the interaction between various precursors to antisocial behaviour, the individual factors outside of the school environment that can influence antisocial pathways such as neurological functioning, coping and resiliency. Justification for the study is noted.

Chapter Three outlines the study’s methodology and provides an overview of the researcher’s ontological, epistemology and theoretical approaches that shape the study design, with an emphasis on critical theory. The purpose of the study and the scope of participants is discussed.

Chapter Four details the methods employed to undertake the study; the demographic, referral procedure, sampling process, the rigour required to ensure trustworthiness, and the data analysis overview.



Chapters Five and Six cover the findings from the participant interviews and focus group discussions. Chapter Seven discusses the study's findings in the context of previous research, including the identification of themes that may require additional research. Finally, the implications for policy and practice and limitations to the study are discussed prior to the conclusion.

## **1.7 Key terms**

There are several key terms that require clarification within the study. Young adult males will be used to refer to as young males aged 16 – 21 years whose negative school experiences may have impacted on and possibly led to pro-criminal behavior. The term participant refers to the 20 young adult males involved in the study.

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter draws attention to the problem of young adult males whose school experiences may have influenced a trajectory into pro-criminal behaviour. Those who fail to engage and bond with the education system, may subsequently be excluded from the system and find themselves on a pathway to anti-social behaviour and criminal activity. The concern is that current policy and procedures adopted by Commonwealth and State Government departments, along with evidence-based literature from the 'what works' paradigm cite individual pathology, in which young offenders are envisaged as rational, responsible decision makers whereas structures and processes outside of their control may influence life choice outcomes. The researcher aligns with the ethos of critical theory which explains how personal meanings and actions are influenced by the person's social environment (Polgar & Thomas 2008). By listening to their voices and engaging in the discourse, their stories and experiences may lead to a better understanding of their situation which may in turn have implications for policy and practice.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter reviews existing Australian and international research in relation to the lived school experiences of young males, the situational factors that may impact on learning, and the risk dynamics associated with early school departure and entry into pro-criminal behaviour. This review of the literature is divided into five-chapter sections. The first section identifies vulnerable students considered ‘at risk’ of school difficulties. The next section explores the ethos of youth offending and whether these young people are excluded, isolated within the system, and not given an opportunity for a voice about their lived experiences. This is followed by a brief historical overview of education in Australia. A focus on research into youth offending emanating from the 1970’s to present day, including seminal studies that cover the ‘What Work’s’ evidence-based practice and other research is discussed. Relationships within the family-school mesosystem are also discussed in this section. The trajectory from difficulties at school to the onset of pro-criminal behaviour is then discussed. Theoretical concepts that underpin the study, and factors both within and outside of the school system that may impact on this trajectory are also discussed. Section 3 details learning and associated disabilities, including studies covering oral language competencies and the subsequent impact on offending behaviour and academic performance. Recent neuroscientific evidence at the forefront of research that identifies a neural signature for dyslexia is also discussed in this section. Section 4 considers international and Australian based strategies that help to prevent ‘at risk’ young peoples’ transition into early school departure and pro-criminal behaviour. Section 5 summarises the key findings in the literature and highlights the research gaps leading to this study.

### **Sections 2-5**

#### **2.1 At-risk children in the education system**

##### **2.1.1 Understanding youth offending including their need for a voice**

When problems occur in the development of a positive identity, formed within family and social structures including education, a pathway to pro-criminal behaviour may transpire. The challenge of separating out school experiences from other psychosocial influences, such as family and neighbourhood, and the overlap that occurs needs consideration. Structuration theory gives some understanding around agency and structure and the nexus between that may influence

a positive connection to school (Giddens 1984). The problem of causation and explanation of crime, a topic that is often ignored in criminology and crime prevention, is the subject of newly developed situational action theory (SAT) (Wikstrom 2007 cited in King & Wincup 2008, p.117). Current justice policy and practice draws on evidence-based theory located within the ‘what work’s’ Risk Need Responsivity (RNR) paradigm. The model identifies risk factors associated with criminal behavior, the targeting of criminogenic needs, and the learning styles of offenders to ensure effective program delivery (Andrews 2006). A critique of the RNR model is found in the Good Lives Model (GLM) (Ward 2010) which premises that individuals are goal-oriented, and that these goals can be attained through practical reasoning – the process of making judgments regarding the value of an individual’s goals as well as identifying the courses of actions required to meet these goals. Other researchers in the field, including Gray (2005), align with critical theory and perceive the risk penology as placing too much emphasis on the individual’s capacity to change while ignoring the influence of socio-economic constraints. What is missing in this debate is the voice of the young offender. As this research project evolved, a realisation emerged that an ecological systems theory model provides a core basis for understanding a trajectory to offending. The ecological model provides a framework in relation to the environmental systems with which an individual interacts from a cultural, social, political and economic context (Johns, Williams & Haines 2017).

While there has been a recent decline in youth offending in Australia (ABS 2016), and other developed countries (National Centre for Juvenile Justice 2017; Ministry of Justice 2015), the cost to the community has risen exponentially (Smith et al. 2014, p. 60). The pathway from summary, community-based offending to more serious offending that results in custodial orders, further exacerbates these costs. What is also known is that young male offenders, the focus of this study, clearly outnumber female offenders.

The trajectory from minor offending to more serious offending when a young offender enters the juvenile justice system is argued in a Queensland study (Lynch, Buckman & Krenske 2003). The study utilised disparate data sets from government departments and services to track 1,503 young offenders over a five-year period from their court appearances in 1994-95 to adult

custodial services in 2002. The researchers found a high level of recidivism and recommended a multidisciplinary, interagency collaborative approach to intervention and prevention strategies.

Although there are individual factors that lead to youth offending, it is well recognised that there are shared characteristics that can influence a young person's predisposition to criminality. One Australian study (Halsey 2008) that undertook 100 preliminary and 50 follow up in-depth interviews with young male offenders aged 15 to 23 years reported issues related to family conflict, poor literacy and numeracy levels with most participants expelled from school prior to Year 10. Murray and Farrington (2010) support these findings and summarise risk factors under the headings of individual, family and social. It is evident from these studies that when there are large gaps in either one or more of these domains, a concerning pathway into anti-social behavior and criminal activity can emerge.

One domain supported by the research in the development of offending behaviour in young people is their educational experience (Ashkar & Kenny 2009). While studies have examined this from the view of factors, such as socioeconomic status, language proficiency and learning disabilities (Review of Funding for Schooling Final Report 2011) 'Gonski', there is a void of published studies that have examined how school experiences have contributed to offending behaviour from the perspective of young male offenders. Scholars agree that it is rare that young peoples' voices are heard across a range of topics, for example, perceptions of school (Ashkar & Kenny 2009); perspectives on their literacy and communication skills (Hopkins, Clegg & Stackhouse 2016); perceived barriers around developmental risk and protective factors (Barnert et al. 2015; Cornell et al. 2013). The aim of this study is to elicit the views of the study participants to investigate their perceptions of the lived school experience and how that may have influenced a trajectory into antisocial and criminal behaviour. Their voice, insight and recommendations are crucial to the implementation of successful interventions.

This research is important because there is a need to raise awareness with school policy makers, administrators, and others in the field about how male students perceived their schooling and how that may have influenced a trajectory into pro-criminal behaviour. This knowledge will assist in the identification of vulnerable, 'at risk' young males in order that their perceptions, opinions and experiences are included in the academic debate and responded to appropriately. It

may also help alleviate the anxiety, fear and apprehension experienced by many people working in the sector who interact with this group of young people who present with externalised behaviour problems, learning and language difficulties.

### **2.1.2 A brief historical overview of secondary education and inequality in Australia**

The past four decades has seen a shift in education policy from the full responsibility of the state to govern schools to a contract base ideology that focuses on individual responsibility and outcome measures. While this change in philosophy may be positive for most students, not all students are benefiting from the change. Within the larger whole, various sub-sets are visible. The student sub-set that is the focus of this study comprises marginalised young males who present with a confluence of disorders within a biopsychosocial framework. These influences include- chaotic home environments, behavioural problems, substance misuse, learning deficits and truancy. Studies suggest an association between school experiences and pro-criminal behaviour (Hemphill et al. 2014), and the associated biopsychosocial influences (Hemphill et al. 2010; Andrews & Bonta 2010; Farrington 2007; Gendreau, Little & Goggin 1996; Zigler, Taussig, and Black 1992). Cross country studies produced similar findings (Hemphill et al. 2014; Hemphill et al. 2007).

Along with the growth in education came the concern that the expansion had resulted in considerable inequality and that many children were disadvantaged and needed special support. These findings saw the tabling of the Karmel Report (1973) in which Connell (1982, p. 23) suggested ‘was the first sign of a sea change in secondary schooling’. The report proposed a modern vision of education in which increased federal funding for schools was to be matched by the states. Underpinning the Karmel Report (1973) was a commitment to promoting equality in outcomes in schooling by making the ‘overall circumstances of children’s education as nearly equal as possible’ (Karmel 1973, p.139).

This shift from the philosophy of the 1960’s and 1970’s in which there was a focus on the ‘needs of the individual child and on social justice within society’ (Lokan 1997, p. 1), to a more labour market, outcomes-based education philosophy of the 1980’s and 1990’s, was instigated by the Quality of Education Review Committee (QERC) and the resultant report, *Quality of Education in Australia* (Karmel, 1985). This ideological shift, according to Ife (1997, p. 23), concluded ‘the

idea of a strong public services and a society committed to collectivist values of social justice were all in retreat'. The latest policy development, namely the Gonski review, confirmed in the May 2014 budget and reaffirmed in the May 2017 budget, is a joint endeavour involving the Commonwealth and the States. The Review recommends that schools are funded dependent on the needs of each student (Sherington & Hughes 2015). The Government's emphasis is timely due to the continuing slide in Australian student performances across international achievement levels since tests were first implemented in 2000 (Povey et al. 2016).

There was increased attention on education following the tabling of the first Karmel report. Additionally, while young people were encouraged to participate in the debate and processes around education (Black 2011), this did not fully eventuate. A meta-analysis study undertaken by Black (2011) concluded that schools were not necessarily inclusive, and that the rhetoric does not match the reality, especially in relation to marginalised young people. Black (2011, p. 463) concurs that the creation of local networks and 'place-based initiatives' has seen a shift from the responsibility of the State to govern education to contracted services. And while there is a commitment in government policy to 'enabling young Australians to accept full responsibility for their lives, their actions and their behaviours [and] empowering young people to build their own lives for the future', (Black 2011, p. 463), the participation of marginalised young people remains 'messy, fraught and ambiguous' (Gallagher 2008, p. 404).

The lack of participation of disadvantaged and marginalised young people in community, political and civic institutions is noted in several other Australian and international studies (Anderton & Abbott, 2009; Kahne & Middaugh 2008; Wierenga et al. 2003). A study that explored young people and decision making, found that 'so often, it is still about what adults do *for* young people – missing the point of working *with* and alongside young people' (Wierenga et al. 2003, p. 5). Statistics show that in May 2009 across Australia 70 percent of young people aged 15 to 19 years were in full-time education. What we also know is that young people in custody 'were found to have a very different education profile from that of the general community' (Indig et al. 2011, p. 33).

In summary, the 'sea change in secondary schooling' in Australia (Connell 1982, p. 23), has led to a more labour market philosophy following the commission of the Karmel Reports. This has

resulted in a re-focus of responsibility in education away from the States to contracted services, with an emphasis on individual responsibility and outcome measures. While this viewpoint may suffice for many students, the needs of some marginalised young people are laden with difficulties and their pathways uncertain. Furthermore, these marginalised students are more likely to be excluded from the discourse and from participation.

### **2.1.3 Risk and protective factors within the school environment**

Given that primary and secondary education is compulsory in most developed countries, schools are uniquely positioned to adopt and implement early intervention and prevention programs to divert young people from crime. For this to take place, school administrators and teachers need to be equipped with knowledge and appropriate resources. A body of research has reported on risk and protective factors related to inclusion and attachment for ‘at risk’ young people within the school setting, and their subsequent trajectory into pro-criminal behaviour (Ttofi et al. 2014; Lowe, May & Elrod 2008; Gottfredson et al. 2005; Farrington 2007). It is also widely recognised that lower academic performance pertains to a serious risk of truancy and early school departure (Snow & Powell 2008). To complement and enhance program implementation, the school system can draw on the body of ‘What Works’ and other evidence from studies into youth offending. This section reviews several risk and protective factors within the school environment.

It is well recognised that school can play a key role in children’s development as a socialising agent and a buffer to negative and anti-social behaviour (Ashkar & Kenny 2009; Lowe, May & Elrod 2008; Weerman, Harland & van der Laan 2007; Gottfredson et al. 2005; Gottfredson & Gottfredson 2002). In contrast, however, the school environment can be an important factor in the development of offending behaviour in situations where children do not feel connected and are rejected by peers (Farrington 2005). Australian research conducted over the past decade (Hemphill et al. 2010; Ashkar & Kenny 2009; Patton et al. 2006) along with studies out of the UK (Hayden 2008; Gray 2005) and Canada (Murray & Farrington 2010), identify the experience of education as an important risk factor leading to problematic behaviour in youth.

While some children enter school with the confidence, enthusiasm and social support that can sustain the next 12 years and prepare them for successful adulthood, other children remain

significantly disadvantaged. A small Australian study (Ashkar and Kenny 2009, p. 359) examined the school experiences of 16 incarcerated adolescent male offenders using phenomenological descriptive methodology to analyse data. The study found that 12 of the 16 participants in the study ‘couldn’t stand’, ‘hated’ or otherwise did not like school. The study is important in that, according to the researchers, there are very few studies both in Australia and internationally, that have spoken directly to young offenders about their school experiences and how these may have influenced their trajectory into crime. These findings concur with this researcher’s search of the literature who, despite an extensive enquiry, has identified very few studies that have elicited the voice of the young offenders.

The challenge of young people adapting to the school setting is not unique to Australia. Two larger studies undertaken in the US, one in a rural setting (n=1354) which centered on theoretical predictors of delinquent behaviour utilising structural equation modelling (SEM), (Lowe, May & Elrod 2008, pp. 343-356) ‘both within in-school and out of school settings and incorporating gender...’ found that ‘...attachment to school served as a buffer against delinquency in every context’. The second study (n=4640), a survey (Welsh 2001, p. 911), explored ‘the effects of several major dimensions of school climate and individual student characteristics on five different measures of school disorder’. In this study, independent measures were taken from the Effective School Battery (ESB) instigated by Gottfredson in 1984. The study found that how students perceive their school environment had a significant impact on their behaviour. The researchers challenged schools to assess which factors within their school environment are perceived as negative by students. A Belgium study (Pauwels & Svensson 2015) used data from a self-reported delinquency study. The children at the higher end of primary school came from disrupted families and immigrant population backgrounds. The study aimed to test the relationship between structural characteristics of school and the participants anti-social behaviour. The hypothesis being these children would have behavioural problems independent of school composition. The study found that peer delinquency had the strongest effect on behavioural problems (Pauwels & Svensson 2015, p. 9).

The above studies support theories relevant to social disorganisation and social control. According to Hirschi’s (1969) control theory, youth are less likely to engage in delinquency



when they are ‘attached and committed to conventional social institutions, are involved in conventional activities, and hold conventional beliefs’ (Lowe, May & Elrod 2008, p. 345). When students fail to attach to the school environment the consequences can have a significant impact on the young person’s life journey, as seen in the Ashkar and Kenny (2009) study. In this study, the participants report that they could not engage in the learning environment and struggled to work in an independent manner. This led to frustration and stress in the classroom. Other factors that influenced their attitude to school included boredom, peer distractions and interpersonal relationships, especially in response to teachers and the fear of embarrassment. While they may have felt an initial desire to achieve, this desire can be surpassed by frustration, anger, hopelessness, and disappointment once failure occurs. The participants’ level of frustration was evident in the remarks from three of the 12 young offenders (Ashkar & Kenny 2009, p. 359) who commented ‘they let me go all the way to Year 8...if you can’t read and write, how are you supposed to do your school work?’ ‘...they were so boring, the classes...I didn’t want to be there, I didn’t care’ ‘I’d be sitting in the classroom with my hand up...trying to get the teacher to help me with my work ...they’d say, ‘just do your work’...I got sick of asking teachers for help’.

A further comparison study (Hemphill et al. 2007), examined and compared findings out of Victoria, Australia and Washington State, United States, around the frequency of antisocial behaviour and societal responses to the behaviour. It found similarities between the two countries. However, youth in the US are likely to experience greater social consequences for their problem behaviour. Ideally, entry into the education system and adapting to the ‘new physical setting, adult authorities, daily schedules, peer relationships and academic challenges’ needs to be a positive experience that enables bonding to occur (Ashkar and Kenny, 2009 p. 356).

One longitudinal study, spanning five years and involving large community samples, undertaken by Murray and Farrington (2010), identified key findings in relation to risk factors associated with conduct disorder and delinquency. They found that student behaviour was enhanced when schools adopted a clear, consistent structure around rules. Individual relationships within the school were also identified as risk and protective factors. For example, a conflictual relationship

between students and teachers and/or students and their peers was a predictor of conduct problems. Additionally, schools with a high task orientation, with an emphasis on homework and academic focus, was identified as a protective factor.

To foster learning opportunities for all students, including those considered high risk of problematic and pro-criminal behaviour, it has been found that there needs to be a focus on policy and procedure within the individual school setting to meet the special needs of ‘at risk’ children and adolescents. A study undertaken in the UK (Hayden 2008), that explored educational deficits of young offenders, found that, while the special schools involved in the study were endeavoring to address the student’s needs, issues pertaining to planning and staffing resulted in poor outcomes for most young offenders.

A review of the literature, incorporating the above studies, demonstrates that the school environment plays a key role in young people connecting with and sustaining the school journey. Students with poor interpersonal and/or academic skills are more likely to experience failure and alienation at school and therefore perceive learning goals as unrealistic. They may be resistant to conventional social activities because they are denied access to programs that are meaningful to them. Therefore, an inclusive school climate and environment, that enables bonding and attachment for all students, is a protective factor, especially for those students considered vulnerable or ‘at risk’.

#### **2.1.4 Relationships within school /family mesosystem**

When defining ‘relationships’ from a social work ethos (Compton, Galaway and Cournoyer, 2005), it is acknowledged that there are elements of power and control within the dynamic that can influence adjustment between the person and their environment. An important aspect of transition to schooling is the development of relationships within the school environment (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Children who have difficulties with this transition perform to a lesser degree on ‘academic, social and interpersonal indicators of school adjustment’ (Baker et al. 2008, p. 3).

Supportive relationships, both within and outside of the school setting, are central to an individual’s emotional and psychological wellbeing (Pianta & Walsh 1996). Young people exhibiting impulsiveness and behavioural disturbances can differ significantly and negatively from their peers in their interactions with others due to family functioning, environmental and

other factors (Farrington 2007). Povey et al. (2016) concurs that disadvantaged parents have lower levels of engagement with the education system and that this phenomenon can influence students' outcomes, academically, socially and behaviourally. The next section explores relationships within an ecological systems paradigm.

#### *2.1.4.1 Student/teacher relationships*

The relationships between students and teachers can be conceptualised from an attachment, motivational, and sociocultural perspective (Davis 2003). The teacher-student interaction, with relevance to those students who present with behavioural difficulties, is influenced by, and dependent upon, various factors both within and outside of the school environment. These features include;

- the family and family environmental characteristics (Renzaho & Karantzas 2010; Sturge-Apple et al. 2008);
- school adjustment (ability to fit into the environment), including constructs that are not entirely related to academic achievement (Sturge-Apple et al. 2008; Ladd 2003);
- individual differences, for example, intellectual capacity, motivation and emotional maturity (Wadsworth 1989; Peterson 1989); and
- the individual characteristics of the teacher, including level of skill and ability to engage, and additionally, the types of supports given to the teacher (Ashkar & Kenny 2009; Lowe, May & Elrod 2008; Hayden 2008; Welsh 2001).

Schools and teachers therefore are in a precarious position in their efforts to engage with, and implement, various supports to assist students with special needs who would be considered vulnerable and 'at risk'. The child is one of many children in the classroom. A review of longitudinal studies related to risk factors for conduct disorder and delinquency (Murray & Farrington 2010), found a high level of distrust between delinquent students and their teachers. Additionally, research on poor school climate undertaken in the US (Welsh 2001), and Australia (Povey et al. 2016), found relationship difficulties. Welsh (2001, p. 920) found that difficulties arose when 'rules were unclear, unfair, or inconsistently enforced...teachers and administrators did not know the rules...and students did not believe in the legitimacy of the rules'. Role

clarification (Trotter 2006) is therefore pertinent to developing trust in the classroom setting. Povey et al. (2016, p. 135) found in their Queensland survey study of 457 Principals and 402 Parents and Citizen's Presidents that there were barriers to engagement with parents from disadvantaged schools and that the 'voices of the parents ... are missing'. We need to be mindful however of underlying individual deficits, such as ADHD, that may underpin the behaviour. These behaviours may occur prior to commencing school or during the early years of primary school (Treatment Protocol Project 2004, p. 468). Children presenting with these disorders are predominately male and often labelled as 'trouble-makers'.

The qualities and values embedded in teachers are a critical component in the building of relationships with students. Research undertaken in the US that looked at internalising and externalising behaviour in primary school children, Baker et al. (2008, p.3), found that, teacher qualities that exhibited 'warmth, trust, and low degrees of conflict' were associated with positive school outcomes. The study selected students from kindergarten to fifth grade (part of a larger longitudinal study), with participants assessed on their behaviour rating scores. The researchers acknowledge however that the correlational methods used in the study may have influenced the results in relation to the direction of effects. For example, teachers are likely to form better relationships with more competent students. These principles are supported by youth offender studies (Andrews et al. 1979; Trotter 2006). Schools, like families, are important socialising domains. The modelling of pro-social values and behaviours was recognised by Andrews and his colleagues (1979). They found tape recordings of probation officers who modelled and reinforced pro-social values ('pro-social' refers to values of non-sexism, non-racism, openness and tolerance) had lower rates of recidivism compared to other probation officers. Reflective listening practices were also important (Trotter 2006, pp.23-24). And while these studies focus specifically upon the offender population, the skills are transferable across all interpersonal realms including the school setting.

Nevertheless, teacher pro-social qualities are not always evident in the classroom. Sometimes when problems occur, schools and teachers are likely to adopt exclusionary approaches (suspension or expulsion) to deal with the issue as a deterrent. Research undertaken by Ashkar & Kenny (2009, p. 364) found that the study participants had primarily poor relationships with

teachers. They felt embarrassed in the classroom and believed that teachers were dismissive and unresponsive to their needs.

In summary, there are many systemic issues that may impact on the relationship between students, parents and teachers. However, there is evidence of teacher qualities and strategies that can enhance the bond, especially with those children considered vulnerable and 'at risk' of problematic behaviour.

#### *2.1.4.2 Peer group selection and influence*

Peer relationships in schools and how these relate to delinquency is also significant. Research outlining the key findings associated with pro-criminal behaviour identifies a clear link between adolescents and their peers (Murray & Farrington 2010; Staff & Kreager 2008; Steinberg & Monahan 2007). What is also known is that the link is stronger in males as opposed to females (Lowe, May & Elrod 2008) and is influential both within and outside of the school setting. This factor is likely to contribute to the disproportionately high number of males who are involved in criminal behaviour.

A review of longitudinal, large sample, studies related to family and social risk factors for conduct disorder and delinquency for young people aged 10 to 17 years (Murray & Farrington 2010), found that several factors including low verbal IQ, school failure and delinquent peers correlated with delinquent behaviour. And while peer relationships are particularly relevant in adolescent years, one US study (Steinberg & Monahan 2007), concluded that the dynamic tends to taper off as the adolescent matures into adulthood. The study (n=3600) males and females aged 18 to 30 in which data was pooled from one longitudinal and two cross sectional studies found that middle adolescence will test a young person's ability to stand up to peers. Thus, anti-social and criminal behaviour is often learned in the interaction with intimate groups; peer groups are significant in this area.

#### *2.1.4.3 Family relational issues*

Theoretical and empirical evidence concurs that various characteristics of the family environment, for example: maternal attachment, social interaction within the family unit, family structures, parenting styles, and cultural background, influence the development of values and social behaviours in children (Renzaho & Karantzas 2010; Anderson 2002; Eisenberg & Mussen

1989). Additionally, it is further acknowledged that this value system may be transmitted from one generation to another and be significantly negatively influenced by intergenerational criminality (Kjellstrand & Eddy 2011). An adverse family environment places young people at risk of similar problems. Risk factors may include: mental health problems, substance abuse, delinquency, school difficulties and the likelihood of future criminal behaviour (Shepherd & Purcell 2015; Murray & Farrington 2010).

The family environment and/or surrounding neighbourhood are therefore key indicators of risk in relation to a young person failing to bond with the school system. A 3-year longitudinal study undertaken in the US (Sturge-Apple et al. 2008) (n=229) of kindergarten children, concluded that school adjustment and parents' emotional availability (closeness through expressions of warmth and praise for children's positive behaviour) had a significant impact on a child's psychological problems, bonding at school, as well as school avoidance. However, given that the assessment occurred at three separate time points in this study, curvilinear patterns of change in children's school adjustment were not able to be measured. The researchers also acknowledge that different results may pertain to older children.

Strategies that will assist in bringing resistant parents 'on board' with their children's education set challenges to teachers, especially when teachers are dealing with problem behaviour in the classroom. An Australian study that examined the school experiences of 16 adolescent male offenders (Ashkar & Kenny 2009, p. 361) found that the majority were from adverse home environments and that four of the young offenders 'lived with extreme domestic violence'. The study reported that school officials did not appear to be aware that the violence existed, and in the minority of cases where they were aware, the school response was ineffective.

Piaget's theory of cognitive and affective development (Wadsworth 1989, p. 14) concurs that 'assimilation is a part of the process by which the individual cognitively adapts to and organizes the environment'. Children from adverse family backgrounds who are exposed to various life stressors including interparental conflict are 'vulnerable to a wide range of emotional, behavioural, social, and academic problems' (Sturge-Apple et al. 2008, p. 1678). Given that the transition to school could be considered a confronting and a times overwhelming challenge, children are likely to call upon 'family relationships as guides for interpreting, understanding,

and responding to the new challenges in the school context' (Sturge- Apple et al. 2008, p. 1680). We also know that the pathway for these children can be deleterious and a likely trajectory to risk of serious delinquency and criminal behaviour. Hence children from adverse family backgrounds are likely to present a special challenge for teachers and school administrators and are particularly vulnerable and in need of specialist support upon entry into and during their school life.

#### *2.1.4.4 School and community*

In addition to the above relationship dynamics, an emphasis on building social inclusion in local communities, along with program sustainability is acknowledged as a protective factor in sustaining young people in education. A case study undertaken in the Australian Capital Territory (Winkworth and McArthur, 2008) highlighted the important role played by social workers and other human services workers in the learning outcomes for students. The workers focused on areas of nutrition, anger management, peer pressure, parenting skills, recreational activities, sexual assault and family violence. The authors acknowledged the difficulty human service programs had in 'breaking into' schools despite an acceptance of this modality internationally. What is recognised is that services, particularly those at the forefront of early intervention of vulnerable 'at risk' children, need to be invited to do so. Key themes relevant to early intervention with children at risk that came out of the Winkworth & McArthur (2008, p. 8) paper were: 'firstly, build trust early; secondly, connecting families to services and bringing services into the school; and thirdly, early intervention and protection for children at risk of harm'.

The need for community-based coalitions for 'at risk' students is supported by international research (Hawkins et al. 2012; Fagan et al. 2009; Brown et al. 2010; Hawkins et al. 2008). US research on the first randomised trial of the Communities that Care (CTC) model (Hawkins et al. 2008), a preventative model that addressed adolescent delinquency and substance use, with subjects drawn from 4,407 fifth grade students, found that less students in the CTC communities instigated delinquent behavior during grades five to seven. Drawing on the Hawkins et al. (2008) findings, further research was undertaken by Fagan et al. (2009) who conducted a 5-year research project that looked at prevention programming to reduce young people's involvement in

violence, delinquency, and substance use, incorporating 12 community coalitions in collaboration with schools. This qualitative study utilised the CTC Youth Survey as a measure of 30 risk and protective factors to identify common themes associated with substance use and problematic behaviour. The researchers found that success was achieved in all cases; this was however not without difficulty. Several schools were concerned about academic time being replaced by unfamiliar programs, there were difficulties accessing evidence-based programs, allocation of the program within an existing school schedule, organisational barriers, the need for supportive staff (champions), and a lack of resources. A limitation of the study was that school personnel were not interviewed to gain their perspective. Data was obtained from the CTC coordinators.

Hawkins and colleagues (2012) further tested the CTC program through implementation of a community randomised trial that targeted 24 small towns in seven states (n=4407). The trial was conducted six years following the installation of the CTC program and one year after the resources ended. The researchers again reported positive findings related to a reduction in problem behaviours, additionally these benefits were assessed as long-term.

Not all studies fully support the effectiveness of community-based coalitions. Flewelling et al. (2005) report on findings from the evaluation of a nonrandomized community trial, the goal being to reduce substance use by students using data from the Youth Risk Behaviour Survey. The researchers conclude that there was minimal empirical evidence to support the model. Nevertheless, a supportive framework nested within the coalitions did demonstrate positive results. An earlier study (Hallfors et al. 2002) examined a substance abuse coalition strategy titled 'Fighting Back'. The study found that, although the model was federally supported, it was not clear if substance abuse was reduced. Additionally, there may be potential for adverse effects.

Despite some criticisms of the effectiveness of community coalitions engaging with, and working within, an educational framework, there is also strong evidence that supports this inclusive model. It was found that coalitions helped build relationships, fostered 'champions' within the schools and helped set in place preventative programs that were particularly relevant in addressing youth delinquency and substance use.



## **Summary**

A review of the literature in this section contextualises young males in the Australian education system and the risk factors, within an ecological systems model, that may lead to a trajectory into pro-criminal behaviour, the focus of the current study. Changes in government policy over the past 50 years has seen a shift to outcomes-based education. The phenomenon has been critiqued by some scholars as diminishing collectivist values within what was previously seen as a strong public service. A concerning recent trend is the decline in student achievement measurements when compared internationally. Finally, the importance of strength-based relationships, within the family school mesosystem, in which the voices of parents and students, mostly marginalised young people and families are often hidden is discussed.

## **2.2 The trajectory into pro-criminal behaviour**

If childhood risk factors pertinent to the onset of pro-criminal behaviour are not addressed during the formative years of schooling, the life course of the young person is likely to be disrupted and fraught with difficulties. Literature relevant to the compounding factors associated with young male students' risk of entry into pro-criminal behaviour are discussed in the following section, along with evidence-based research of a biopsychosocial and ecological systems theory construct.

### **2.2.1 Theories associated with educational experiences and pro-criminal behaviour**

Several theories are influential in explaining the developmental pathways of young males, from early childhood, to entry into school, and the transition from primary to secondary school (Laferriere & Morselli 2015; Leiber & Peck 2014; Capuzzi & Gross 2014). The subsequent problems that might arise may be related to family background, peer influence, substance abuse, failure to bond with the personnel in the school facility, and the onset of pro-criminal behaviour.

Central to adjustment problems that may arise in early childhood are the concepts of neurodevelopment and attachment theory (Perry 2009; De Bellis 2005), and emotional security theory (EST) (Sturge-Apple et al. 2008). Over the past 30 years, an awareness and understanding of the impact of child maltreatment, neglect and trauma is supported by the advancement in science and technology in the context of brain development, the plasticity of the brain, and the subsequential impact on a child's psychological and learning outcomes. An article

outlining the principles of neurodevelopment (Perry 2009, pp. 241-242) identifies that the brain organises itself in a ‘...hierarchical fashion with four main anatomically distinct regions: brainstem, diencephalon, limbic system, and cortex...from the bottom up, from the least (brainstem) to the most complex (limbic, cortical) areas’. Those children who come from a background of abuse and neglect, who were not afforded the opportunity to attach with a parent or carer, are likely to be severely disadvantaged both socially and academically.

Once at school, theoretical explanations of anti-social and delinquent behaviour may include: social organisation and social control theories (Hirschi, 1969; Payne, Gottfredson & Gottfredson 2003), differential association and social learning theories (Farrington, 2005), strain, culture conflict and critical theories (Lowe, May & Elrod 2008; Agnew, 1997). Additionally, systems and ecological theories (Guajardo, Snyder & Petersen 2009) provide an explanation of the links between the past meso familial childhood environments and behavioural problems.

One US study (Lowe, May & Elrod 2008) (n=1384) used a structural equation model to examine theoretical predictors of delinquency, both within school and out of school, incorporating gender differences. The findings suggest that attachment to school formed a buffer against anti-social behaviour thereby supporting the hypotheses of social disorganisation and social control theorists. Social disorganisation theories seek to detect emerging themes in criminal groups within a social network. Social control theorists report on factors which determine whether a person engages in criminal activity. Other strong indicators of delinquency were related to victimisation. In other words, youth exposed to victimisation were more likely to be involved in delinquency. This result is supported by opportunity theorists (Augustine and colleagues 2002). The theory suggests that offenders chose targets that offer a reward with little effort. Delinquent peer influence also showed up strongly thus supporting differential association and social learning theories. Additionally, family strain –noxious stimuli supporting the notion of strain, cultural conflict, and critical theories associated with exposure to severe disadvantage were also predictors. Notably, the study also found that delinquent peer influence was the strongest predictor in males. This may be because, when in interactions with peers, there is a need to exert masculinity (Lowe, May & Elrod 2008, p. 359).

Children exposed to dysfunctional, violent and anti-social behaviours within the home environment are likely to model these behaviours in their interactions at school. Behavioural theorists, such as Skinner (1938), proposed that behaviour (operant learning and conditioning) is contingent upon environmental consequences. His *ABC* (*Antecedent, Behaviour, and Consequence*) model of behaviour recognises that consequences either increase (reinforce) or decrease (punish) the frequency of behaviour. Operant learning is criticised by others for ignoring the cognitive processes that may be occurring.

Albert Bandura (1977) expanded on the concept of operant learning and conditioning in his explanation of social learning theory. He proposed that people learn by observing the actions of others (i.e., a model). However, this is dependent upon the environmental consequences of reinforcement or punishment. This premise was clearly seen in the seminal findings (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961), as detailed in the BoBo Doll experiment. The research studied patterns of behaviour associated with aggression modelled for young children. The findings concluded that children exposed to the aggressive model were more likely to act in a physically aggressive manner than those who were not exposed to the model, thus supporting the principle of observational/vicarious learning.

Several theoretical concepts provide an explanation of why some young males experience difficulties during their school years, why they exit from the system early, and end up on a trajectory into pro-criminal behaviour. A search of the literature concludes that these theoretical concepts need to be seen within a biopsychosocial context and an ecological systems model.

### **2.2.2 Youth offender ‘what works’ response**

To gain some understanding of the link between young males’ difficulties at school and their subsequent entry into pro-criminal behaviour, scholars and clinicians are now guided by an abundance of evidence-based studies into youth offending emanating over the past three decades. This section tracks the research literature from the ‘nothing works’ ideology of the 1970’s to meta-analysis studies of the 1980’s and 1990’s and the identification of the Risk, Need, Responsivity (RNR) model of classification, to more recent studies that focus on the effective implementation of RNR intervention models. Contrary interventions are also discussed and debated.

A published summary of evidence-based assessment and treatment of young offenders (Leschied & Cunningham, 1999) noted a substantial increase in published literature after the late 1980's and early 1990's. The rise in interest followed Martinson's (1974, p. 25) seminal statement, 'with few and isolated exceptions the rehabilitative efforts that have been reported so far have had no appreciable effect on recidivism'. This comment was timely in that it set a challenge for others in the field, including policy makers and researchers, to take a closer look at the outcome literature to identify an evidence-based framework that would look at the causes and therapeutic processes to treatment of youth offending. Andrews and his colleagues (1990) were the first to use meta-analytic reviews to examine the specific variables associated with offender rehabilitation and reductions in recidivism. The meta-analysis (Andrews et al. 1990) reported on 45-50 studies, including the (Whitehead 1989) meta-analysis that supported the 'nothing works' argument, a methodology subsequently challenged by Andrews and colleagues because of the binary (less-more) measure of recidivism that excluded several variables, for example substance abuse. The meta-analysis (Andrews et al. 1990) reported on five core principles that constitute effective practice in treating youth (and adult) offenders namely: risk, needs, responsivity, program integrity, and professional discretion. This was the catalyst for a shift from the general personality theory, a focus of research through the 80's, to a more risk specific means of offender classification. A shift also occurred with Martinson who acknowledged that 'some treatment programs do have an appreciable effect on recidivism' (Martinson 1979, p.244).

Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, undertaken in the 1990's (Andrew & Bonta 2010; Gendreau, Little & Goggin 1996), conclude that several risk factors place young people at increasing risk for criminogenic involvement. These factors include substance abuse, families of origin, peer associates, and school or working conditions. The studies support a *social-psychological understanding* of criminogenic risk, the premise being that individuals may cognitively process conditions in their environment that develop or reward certain styles or content of thinking that are reflected in anti-social behaviour.

While we have research findings regarding pro-criminal behaviour, there is scant knowledge about the outcomes in relation to implementation of programs, especially in areas of public domain such as the education system (Lipsey, Howell & Kelly 2010). To address this issue,

Lipsey and his colleagues analysed the findings of 548 evaluation studies. This robust study found ‘model’ programs as identified in the research literature include, Functional Family Therapy, Aggression Replacement Therapy, and Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (Lipsey, Howell & Kelly 2010, p. 18).

The ‘What Works’ principles have therefore assisted in the development of a ‘*science of criminal conduct*’ (Leschied 2000, p. 87) that forms the basis of assessment and intervention with young offenders. The science however is not without challenge from other researchers in the field including Gray (2005) who aligns with critical theory and perceives the risk penology as placing too much emphasis on the individual’s capacity to change while ignoring the influence of socio-economic constraints. Furthermore, there is ongoing heated debate contrasting studies underpinning the Good Lives Model (GLM) (Ward, Yates & Willis 2012) and the Risk Need Responsivity Model (RNR) (Andrews et al. 2011). The GLM defines eleven primary human goods (including knowledge and friendship) and how these goods are achieved through secondary goods. The model proposes that offenders will divert into antisocial and criminal behaviour to achieve their goods. The RNR proponents are critical of the GLM’s assessment and planning process while the GLM proponents believe that the RNR model, like Gray (2005), fails to incorporate the holistic needs of the offender. The robust debate into youth offending, and an analysis of the outcome literature, provide a framework for policy makers and clinicians. A knowledge and understanding of this literature is required in all domains, including education, if young males are to be re-directed from pro-criminal behaviour and entry into the justice system.

Tonry and Farrington (1995) identify four strategies that redirect young people and avert risk. The first strategy, *developmental prevention*, in line with the ‘What Works’ (Andrews et al. 1990) meta-analysis, identifies programs that lessen the development of criminal potential by targeting risk and protective factors. The second, *community prevention*, targets the young person’s social conditions and institutions that can influence offending behaviour. The third, *situational prevention*, aims to address and reduce the opportunistic nature of offending behaviour. The final strategy, *criminal justice prevention*, aligns with deterrence and rehabilitative strategies. A reduction in children’s risk factors will only be possible if schools take a lead role in the early intervention and redirection of marginalised, ‘at risk’ young people.

### **2.2.3 Patterns of thinking, behaviour and impulsivity**

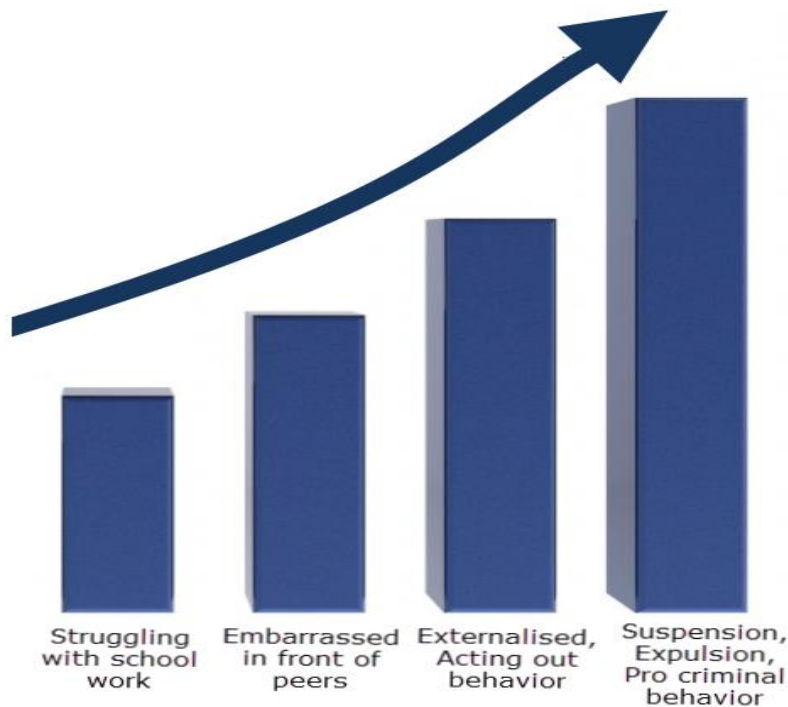
How we perceive our environment influences our behaviour within that environment. Patterns related to cognition, and behaviour that results in a young people failing to engage with the school system, can be evident at an early age. Piaget (1970) discusses the preoperational stage of cognitive development, a period between ages two and six during which a child learns to use language. During this stage, children do not yet understand concrete logic, cannot mentally manipulate information, and are unable to take the point of view of other people.

Developmental researchers (Hogendoorn et al. 2014; Bowman & Auerbach 1982; Meichenbaum & Goodman 1971; Luria 1961) have explored the relationship between a child's behavioural regulations and self-talk. A comparison study of impulsive youth (Bowman and Auerbach 1982) found that adoption of positive thought patterns as opposed to negative thought patterns through use of reflection helped to address impulsivity. In some children the expected sequence of 'internal speech' fails to occur, occurs only in part, or occurs in a distorted form. The theory was supported by Copeland (1981) through observation of children in a naturalistic environment in which the impulsive children used more immature speech than their reflective counterparts. Poor impulse control is a risk factor in the onset and maintenance of pro-criminal and aggressive behaviour (Horn et al. 2003; Barratt 1994). Moffitt and Caspi (2001) reported on one UK longitudinal study in which impulsivity is a significant risk factor to life-course antisocial behaviour. What is also recognised is that impulsivity is a dynamic risk factor therefore amenable to change (Bonta & Andrews 2007).

Children who present with developmental delay are known by their hyperactivity, impulsivity, poor self-control and acting out behaviour. They are noticeable in the classroom at an early age, come to the attention of teachers, administrators, other parents and their peers, and are therefore in a position in which labelling can occur. The findings demonstrate that language is an integrative component of cognition and behaviour.

The trajectory from a young child 'acting out' in the classroom, to a point when the behaviour and attitude can jeopardise the education of the young person, cumulate in problematic behaviour, lead to school 'drop out', and entry into pro-criminal behaviour, is the concern of this

research study (see Figure 1). An Australian comparison study that examined the language skills of young male offenders (n=30) (Snow & Powell 2005), found that, while the researchers were cognisant of other possible underlying psychosocial factors, the young offenders performed more poorly than their age peers in their language ability. Whereas the more recent scholarly attention to deficits in language skills of young male offenders adds to the literature, there is limited information about the perceptions of young offenders (Hopkins, Clegg & Stakehouse 2016).



**Figure 1 - Trajectory to pro-criminal behavior**

While language deficits are one known cause of criminal activity, Snow and Powell (2005, p. 1) draw attention to the ‘confluence of overlapping developmental disorders and influences’. (McGuire 1995, p. 40) points out that the causes of criminal conduct are not unlike the causes of any other socially valued human behaviour, that is, ‘situational, circumstantial, personal, interpersonal, and familial’.

#### **2.2.4 Identity, status, peers and belonging**

Research cognisant with social control theory suggests that there is a connection between pro-criminal behaviour and the weakening of values transmitted via institutions such as the family

and school, the school being an important location for bonding or (failure). One seminal writer was Hirschi (1969 cited in Welsh 2001, p. 917). He discussed 'four major elements of social bonding – commitment to conventional goals...attachment to prosocial others... involvement in conventional activities... [and] belief in conventional rules'. The survey study undertaken by Welsh (2001) explored dimensions of school climate along with individual student characteristics on measures of disorder ( $n = 4640$ ). Their findings suggest that school disorder can be reduced if school administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community groups play a concerted role. However, when young people do not attach to these values and failure occurs, they may view the values as unachievable and unrealistic and look elsewhere for personal identity.

The formation of identity is related to a person's experiences, roles and attributes that lead to a sense of self (Jones et al. 2014; McMurrin 2002). If one's identified self does not fit within the conventional norms of society, an identity crisis can occur and there is a need to look elsewhere to nurse the fragile ego (Erikson 1968). Research suggests that there is a significant difference in the relationship between gender and crime. One US study that researched rural youth (Lowe, May & Elriod 2008) found that the strongest predictor of delinquency in the males undertaking the study was peer influence. They had evidence to suggest that this may be due to young males needing to exert their masculinity. And it is within that peer influence and association that a new bonding starts to occur in the form of subcultures.

Studies outlining the key findings related to pro-criminal behaviour identify a clear link between adolescents and their peers (Murray & Farrington 2010; Staff & Kreager, 2008; Monahan, Steinberg & Cauffman 2009). What is also known is that the link is stronger in males as opposed to females (Lowe et al. 2008) and is influential both within and outside of the school setting. This factor is likely to contribute to the disproportionately high number of males who are involved in criminal behaviour. And while this relationship is particularly relevant in the adolescent years, it tends to taper off as the adolescent matures into adulthood (Steinberg & Monahan 2007). Additionally, youth are more likely to affiliate with peers who have similar attitudes, values and beliefs and once bonded to an antisocial peer group, the trajectory into criminal behaviour can be a swift process.



The school setting therefore is likely to be the initial environment in which failure and rejection with mainstream activities occur and are subsequently replaced by bonding with pro-criminal peers. From a developmental stance, young people are highly sensitive to peer scrutiny therefore behaviour's within the classroom may reflect the 'need to maintain face in front of their peers' (Ashkar & Kenny 2009, p. 360). This small Australian study undertaken in 2003-2004, in which young offenders were interviewed about their school experiences, demonstrated that peer influence was a significant factor in relation to behavioural problems in the classroom with comments such as 'I was just wanting to show off in front of everyone else...I didn't like to lose face in front of people'. Replicating their peers by adopting their behaviour was important to project a 'tough' image 'they'd say, ...smash him up...not that I really wanted to hurt anyone...it was a group sort of thing...made me look good' (Ashkar & Kenny 2009, pp. 360-361).

While the research clearly identifies the relationship between pro-criminal behaviour during adolescence, and how peers influence that behaviour, there is limited research as to why peers are not as influential during the transition into adulthood (Farrington 2005). One study (Monahan, Steinberg & Cauffman 2009, p. 1527) found that '...antisocial behaviour appears to be due to both selection and socialisation in middle adolescence but only to socialisation during late adolescence'. The researchers in their quest for a 'comparable developmental pattern' (Monahan, Steinberg & Cauffman 2009, p. 1527) could only highlight historical studies which demonstrated similar interests, such as illicit substance use, would continue that peer bond into adulthood.

### **2.2.5 Substance abuse**

Research suggests a relationship between illicit substance use in adolescence and subsequent adjustment difficulties, for example, poor school attendance, decreased academic motivation and achievement, impaired cognition and functioning, health problems and pro-criminal behaviour (Ashkar & Kenny 2009; Flory et al. 2004; Chassin, Pitts & Prost 2002). In Australia, key findings from a 2009 NSW health survey of young people in custody (average age 17 years), found that 93 percent had experienced being drunk (average age of first drink was 13); 66 percent reported being drunk on a weekly basis, and 89 percent reported the use of illicit drugs,

the most common drug being cannabis. Two-thirds of young people had committed crime to access drugs and or alcohol (Indig et al. 2011).

While there is substantial debate about whether substance abuse results in pro-criminal behaviour or pro-criminal behaviour leads to substance abuse, studies indicate that the two are interrelated (Briere et al. 2014; Hart et al. 2007). Research undertaken in the UK, from a life course perspective (Maggs, Patrick & Feinstein, 2008, pp. 7-17), examined ‘predictors of substance use trajectories from adolescence into adulthood’. This longitudinal study found that, adjustment difficulties in childhood had a, ‘...small predictive relationships with drinking [nevertheless]...social maladjustment in pre-adolescence predicted...more harmful drinking’ (Maggs, Patrick & Feinstein, 2008, p. 17). A further study of 4885 adolescents, using path analysis, in which the adolescents were followed through secondary school found that illicit drug use affects school dropout and conduct problems, with a less influential factor being deviant peer affiliation (Briere et al. 2014). Further studies show that comorbid psychiatric illness among juvenile offenders is high (Fazel et al. 2008), therefore substance abuse, which the young person may use to self-medicate, could underpin and mask more serious mental health problems, such as low self-esteem, anxiety and depression.

#### **2.2.6 Bullying and the relationship to low self esteem**

There is substantial research that shows a relationship between self-esteem (Eisele, Zand & Thomson 2009; Ashkar & Kenny 2009; Boden, Fergusson & Horwood 2008; Alexander-Passe 2006) including perception of self, and functioning across a wide number of domains, for example, mental illness, substance use (Valdebenito, Ttofi & Eisner 2015), suicidal ideation and social and adjustment problems (Cornell et al. 2013; Barnert et al. 2015). Self-esteem can be thought of in terms of – self-worth, self-regard, self-respect, and self-acceptance (Horyniak et al. 2017). Erikson’s (1968) seminal work on identity formation, envisaged adolescence as a critical period in life in which the question, ‘Who am I’, is often asked. Given the association between low self-esteem and the above domains, Boden, Fergusson and Horwood (2008, p. 319) concur that ‘...self-esteem plays a causal role in life outcomes, with an individual’s level of self-esteem being critical in determining success and failure across a range of life tasks’. This 25-year longitudinal study (Boden, Fergusson & Horwood 2008) which assessed the self-esteem of

young people aged 15 and again at the age of 18, 21 and 25, while at the same time making an adjustment pertinent to the psychosocial context, found that a decrease in self-esteem when assessed at age 15 and in later ages was minimal. What the researchers found was that self-esteem could be more acutely viewed as a risk marker variable that reflects other causal factors, the psychosocial context in which the self-esteem developed. The research is critical of discrepancies in the literature that view low self-esteem as a primary cause of adjustment problems.

The prevalence of bullying in the school setting is recognised as a significant risk factor for poor academic performance and early school departure (Cornell et al. 2013). A qualitative study of incarcerated adolescent offenders, the first undertaken in Australia (Ashkar & Kenny 2009), indicated that 14 of the 16 male participants were victims. In a second study, in the United States (Barnert et al. 2015, p. 1366), incarcerated youth reported that ‘schools felt unsafe because of gang activity and bullying’. A study that looked at self-perception (Ferguson, Hafen & Laursen. 2010, p. 1485) suggests that, ‘adolescents develop multiple views of the self, which include perceptions of self-states (e.g., how young people view actual self or alternative possible selves)’. Therefore, when self-esteem is threatened by conventional pursuits, for example, failure to achieve in their education, young people will often turn to deviant peer groups for acceptance (Ashkar & Kenny 2009).

While longitudinal research suggests that causal factors, for example, psychosocial influences are more likely to result in low self-esteem (Orth & Robins 2014), other studies (Alexander-Passe 2006) comment on children who experience learning difficulties, for example dyslexia, as a trigger to low self-esteem. The study which looked at self-esteem, coping and depression, found that academic failure had a significant influence on self-esteem and the development of inferiority complexes, and was a likely trajectory into pro-criminal behaviour. The school environment therefore can offer an important and protective role in the enhancement of self-esteem and alleviation of bullying, as demonstrated in a meta-analysis study (n = 3694) undertaken by Sarkova et al. (2014) which found that secure pupil-peer and pupil-teacher relationships were conducive to less depression, anxiety and social dysfunction.

Given that high self-esteem is a protective factor against problems such as illicit substance use (Boden, Hafen & Laursen 2008), programs and strategies that build capacity in young people and enhance self-esteem are important to academic achievement. Such programs and strategies, cited in Boden's study, will be discussed further in this literature review.

### **2.2.7 Comorbid disorders**

Studies show that between 10 percent and 20 percent of young people at any point in time experience a mental illness that causes significant impairment in their functioning (Treatment Protocol Project 2004). Furthermore, it is reported that the incidence of diagnosable psychiatric illness among young offenders is considerably higher compared to age-related peers (Ttofi et al. 2014; Fazel et al. 2008; Bickel & Campbell 2002). A leading concern is that many mental health problems often go undiagnosed due to chaotic home environments, family stressors and the inability of parents and carers to effectively manage their children's developmental needs. The disorders come under the umbrella of: behavioural, disruptive and externalising disorders (attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional disorder, and conduct disorder); emotional disorders (depression and anxiety); pervasive developmental disorders (autism and asperger's syndrome); early onset psychotic disorders (bipolar disorder and schizophrenia). These disorders may onset in primary school or during early adolescence, a time when young people are normally connected to mainstream education. The school outcomes for young males experiencing these disorders are likely to be severely compromised.

#### *2.2.7.1 Behavioural, disruptive or externalising disorders (ADHD; Oppositional disorder; conduct disorder)*

The incidence of behavioural, disruptive and externalising disorders may occur prior to commencing school or during the early years of primary school (Treatment Protocol Project 2004, p. 468). Children presenting with these disorders are predominately male and often labelled as 'trouble-makers'. Because these children 'find it difficult to learn from experience', the behaviours may continue into early adulthood.

The above disorders come under the diagnoses of *attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder* (ADHD), *oppositional disorder*, and *conduct disorder*. *Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder* is one of the most frequently diagnosed disorders with onset likely before the age of seven years. It

is recognised that children who present with the disorder have difficulty concentrating, experience impulsivity and heightened activity. Furthermore, these children are more likely to abuse alcohol and illicit substances (Economidou 2009; Fazel et al. 2008; Friedlander & Moss 2008; Treatment Protocol Project 2004). Children diagnosed with *oppositional disorder* are rebellious and will repeatedly challenge the system in a defiant, disobedient and insolent manner. *Conduct disorder* presents in children as ‘repetitive and persistent patterns of antisocial or aggressive conduct with violations of major social rules or norms’ (Treatment Protocol Project 2004, p. 468). A recent 30-year longitudinal study (Fergusson, Boden & Horwood 2014) found a direct link between childhood bullying and adult criminal offending. The above disorders can have a deleterious impact on other students, teachers and school administrators (Lowe, May & Elrod 2008) causing disruption, and anti-social behaviour both within and out of the school environment and can also impair others ability to learn.

While problem behaviours of an externalising nature present as challenging and highly recognisable across several domains, for example, the education system, support services and familial environment, other mental health problems may not be so recognisable. Language competency is one such area.

#### *2.2.7.2 Emotional disorders*

Studies show that ‘at least one out of every four to five young people in the general population will suffer from at least one mental disorder in any given year’ (Patel et al. 2007 p. 1304) This finding is supported by others in the field who report on the correlation between mental illness and offending behaviour (Fazel et al. 2008; Bickel & Campbell 2002). The concern however is that emotional disorders, such as depression and anxiety in children and adolescents, are often undetected by parents and teachers (Treatment Protocol Project 2004).

There is a strong association between mental disorder, poverty and social disadvantage with a suggestion that the pathway is bidirectional and multifaceted (Patel et al. 2007). It is well known that successful adjustment to school is reliant upon both academic and social competence; however, children who experience learning difficulties are subject to strain involving negative emotions such as fear, depression and anger. When this occurs, there is an increased likelihood of young people adopting antisocial behavior (Lowe, May & Elrod 2008). And while gender

differences are evident in coping styles (Alexander-Passe 2006, p. 260), with this study showing females experiencing higher levels of depression than males, children with learning difficulties have reported feeling ‘disappointed, frustrated, ashamed, fed up, sad, depressed, angry and embarrassed’.

#### *2.2.7.3 Past traumatic experiences: a behavioural and school perspective*

The cumulative outcome of negative interpersonal and social constructs in the formative years of a child’s life forms the nexus for compromised neurological problems of a longstanding nature, particularly if the problem is not assessed and treated in the early years.

Historical research (Chapin 1917, Bender & Yarnell 1941, Bakwin 1942), noted the physical and cognitive deficits of young children who were institutionalised and experienced physical and emotional neglect. The past 30 years has seen an upsurge in developmental neurobiology (Perry 2009; Shaywitz & Shaywitz 2008; De Bellis 2005). Perry (2009, p. 240) concludes that this evidence has ‘informed and influenced practice in several clinical disciplines, including pediatrics, psychology, social work, and psychiatry’.

The relationship between adverse trauma-based childhood experiences and a trajectory into criminal behavior is the focus of a recent study that examined 22,575 delinquent youth in Florida, USA (Fox et al. 2015). The researchers developed a childhood trauma-based screening tool to identify children at risk of serious and violent crime. Findings demonstrate that each traumatic experience a child experiences increases the risk of offending in adulthood. However, the reliance on brain research as a sentencing option alone needs debate around labelling the individual. Young people can present with a variety of socio-structural disadvantages that result in offending (Cox 2010). What we also know is that mid-adolescence is a time of intensified vulnerability to risky and reckless behaviour (Steinberg 2008, p.78).

#### *2.2.7.4 Neurobiology – mental health and antisocial behaviour*

A search of the literature has found an abundance of emerging research on developmental neurobiology, particularly in relation to mental health and antisocial behaviour. This research has come to light primarily out of the US (Strenziok et al. 2011; Johnson, Blum & Giedd 2009; Narvaez & Vaydich 2008; Shaywitz & Shaywitz 2008), Europe (Loeber, Byrd & Farrington

cited in Morizot & Kazemian 2015) but also includes a study from the UK (Blackmore, Wonston, & Frith 2004), and some Australian studies (Dolan 2010; Pridemore, Chambers & McArthur 2005).

Key findings in the study of neurobiology have created a shift from the traditional medical model of intervention to an emphasis on neurobiology-guided practice. This includes the use of neuroimaging methods as a means of assessment (Narvaez & Vaydich 2008; De Bellis 2005; Shaywitz & Shaywitz 2008), in conjunction with intervention models, such as the neurosequential model of therapeutics (NMT) (Perry 2009). While techniques, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), bring new perspectives to our understanding of human development and behaviour, there is debate underpinning this new paradigm. The debate relates to a shift from the medical model of intervention to a systemic and holistic model of intervention. Narvaez & Vaydich (2008, p. 290) argue that ‘humans are complex systems which live within elaborate social networks...which we can hardly measure in isolation’.

Children who transition to schooling with impaired cognitive functioning arising from the experiences of trauma and neglect will likely experience poor outcomes. Research is now looking to address this problem. An overview of the NMT approach undertaken by Perry (2009) in the treatment of maltreated children defines three core elements: *a developmental history*, *a current assessment of functioning*, and *a set of recommendations for intervention*. Furthermore, the sequence of how deficits are addressed in intervention is crucial to outcome. It is recommended that you start with the lowest brain abnormality by adopting strategies such as: music, movement, yoga (breathing), drumming and therapeutic massage, and move sequentially up the brain as improvements are noted, then focus on verbal/insight oriented (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy(CBT)/psychodynamic) interventions. Current practice suggests that many clinicians are more likely to implement the latter mode of intervention and thus not effectively connect with the individual.

Research that examines moral reasoning is now informed by the science of neurobiology. Historically, developmental psychologists such as Lawrence Kohlberg, assumed that individuals dealt with moral problems in a deliberate, conscious manner (Narvaez & Vaydich 2008). An emerging view is that ‘human thought processes, decisions and choices are ...driven by internal

multiple unconscious systems operating in parallel, often automatically and without our awareness' (Narvaez & Vaydich 2008, p. 292). It is suggested that neuroscience will over time influence policy relevant to student behaviour within the education system (Sankey 2008). However, it will not be the only influence.

#### *2.2.7.5 Pervasive developmental disorders*

According to the Treatment Protocol Project (2004), children and adolescents diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorders, namely childhood autism and Asperger's syndrome, experience serious deficits in several developmental domains, including '...impairment in reciprocal social interaction, impairment in communication, and the presence of stereotyped behaviour, interests and activities'. In their social interactions with others, children experiencing this impairment will often fail to respond to other people's emotions. This inability to 'perspective take' or understand the feelings of others can result in low moral reasoning, incorporating antisocial beliefs and behaviour.

Several recent studies (King & Murphy 2014; Geluk et al. 2012; Jones et al. 2010; Jones et al. 2009) have reported on the relationship between pervasive developmental disorders and externalising behaviour. Whilst an absence of emotional and cognitive empathy is associated with psychopathic tendencies in many young male offenders who are known to have problems recognising distress in other people (Jones et al. 2010), children who present with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) find it hard to understand what other people think. An earlier study, undertaken by Jones and her colleagues (2009), that looked at the independence of psychopathic tendencies and autistic traits (n. 642 twin pairs) found that, although environmental influences overlapped, emotional attribution in both areas were related to genetic factors.

It is acknowledged that a significant number of people with pervasive developmental disorders are involved in criminal behaviour (Geluk et al. 2012; Dein & Woodbury-Smith 2010). However, research in this area is scant and a 'specific association' is not yet found between the syndrome and offending behaviour. It is well known that children with pervasive developmental disorders require intensive intervention and support. It is arguable that schools are in an ideal position to offer such support.



## **Summary**

The literature in this section identifies clear links to the research questions around the factors related to the young person's experiences of school and the educational environment, and the associated risk factors that can impede outcomes at school. It highlights the issue of physical and cognitive deficits in children brought about by past traumatic experiences that may be evident, although not necessarily diagnosed. Of concern is transition to and adjustment at school, a pathway which is often influenced by internal representations related to the trauma. The section also comments on the current upsurge in developmental neurobiology, the correlation with neglect and the associated adverse psychological and learning outcomes. What is known is that this group is at risk of emotional, psychological and social problems and that these problems can be profound and longstanding. This new evidence is now informing practice and influencing school pathways and future outcomes.

### **2.2.8 Environmental factors that constitute risk pathways to pro-criminal behaviour**

Successful academic achievement is influenced by many factors both within and outside of school sector. Of notable interest are those factors related to the family-school mesosystem, including early childhood development and disrupted attachments (Perry 2009); family conflict, relationship problems and instability (McIntosh 2003); cultural factors (Day 2003; Thomas & Kearney 2008); and intergenerational criminality (Kjellstrand & Eddy 2011). Children who experience one or more of these factors are significantly more at risk of learning deficits, academic failure, early school departure and involvement with the justice system. Schools therefore are ideally positioned to assess vulnerable, 'at risk' children and to implement early intervention strategies that will enhance relationships and lead to better outcomes. Teachers and school administrators require knowledge and understanding of these factors. Those schools that fail to respond in a pro-active, targeted and responsive manner to individualised student needs are more likely to be negatively impacted.

#### *2.2.8.1 The family system and neighbourhood environment*

Studies show that various characteristics of the family environment, for example: maternal attachment, social interaction within the family unit, family structures, parenting styles, and cultural background, are influential in the development of children's values and social

behaviours (Barnert et al. 2015; Fix & Burkhart 2015; Renzaho & Karantzas 2010; Eisenberg & Mussen 1989; Reid, Patterson & Snyder 2002; Brown et al. 2010). It could be argued therefore that the family unit is the child's primary and most important socialising agent.

Social learning theory suggests that children learn from one another, through observation, imitation and modelling. Furthermore, this learned behaviour may be transmitted from one generation to another (Reid, Patterson & Snyder 2002). Once negative traits are transmitted, risk factors emerge that make children and adolescents become vulnerable to concerns associated with mental health problems, substance abuse, delinquency, school difficulties and the likelihood of future criminal behaviour (Johnston 1995; Murray & Farrington 2005).

An Australian study carried out in 2006 (Renzaho & Karantzas 2010) under the auspice of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) - *2006 Victorian Child Health and Wellbeing Survey* (VCHWS), focused on family functioning. The researchers surveyed over 3000 Victorian children aged four to 12, to assess the effect of family environment stressors (e.g., poor family functioning and parental psychological distress), and neighbourhood environment on child prosocial behaviour (CPB) and child difficulty behaviour (CDB). Difficulty refers to antisocial behaviour. Their findings demonstrate the importance of family environment in the development of responsible, caring, empathic children which in turn provides a 'buffer' to the development of behavioural difficulties at an early stage of life. Positive family functioning was found to be the most significant predictor of CPB and likewise children with low levels of CDB were associated with poorly functioning families. In relation to neighbourhood, the researchers found that infrastructure and accessibility were associated with CDB. One recent study that drew on longitudinal data found that, in relation to desistance, neighborhoods in which youth reside have been understudied and that exposure to a pro-criminal peer group can influence offending behaviour (Wright et al. 2014).

Dimensions of family functioning that enhance an individual's social, psychological and biological construct and maintenance thereof (Reid, Patterson & Snyder 2002) involve: problem solving, affective communication including nonverbal responses, affective responses (welfare emotions such as affection, warmth, tenderness, support, love, consolation, happiness, and joy; emergency emotions incorporating fear, anger sadness, disappointment, and depression),

affective involvement, behaviour control, and roles (reoccurring patterns of behaviour by which family members fulfill discharge family functions).

The family unit therefore is instrumental in establishing the basis to enable individuals to meet academic and social achievement within the broader family school mesosystem. Also related to children's problematic behaviour is the neighbourhood environment, the availability of services, and parent's and children's perception of the environment (Renzaho & Karantzas 2010).

#### *2.2.8.2 Family violence and the impact of trauma and neglect*

A multi-country study of domestic violence, undertaken by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Marcus & Braaf 2007), reports that historically, violence against women, and family violence, were considered a minor social problem. This world view has changed since the 1990's, it is now recognised as a serious public health and human rights problem. Additionally, US statistics confirm that more than a third of American children have witnessed parental violence (McIntosh 2003). The child as a 'silent witness' phenomenon is now challenged by qualitative research in which children are given a voice (Laing 2000). Children exposed to domestic violence are 15 times more likely to be physically abused than their peers (McIntosh 2003, p. 220).

A national Australian survey that looked at the prevalence of domestic violence in Australia was undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 1996. The study found that 68 percent of women who reported violence had children in their care, and that 46 percent reported that their children had witnessed the violence (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2009). A 2006 survey, undertaken by the ABS, titled the *Personal Safety Survey* (Marcus & Braaf 2007, p.10) confirmed that 49 percent (111,700) of people experienced partner violence. Of that number, 27 percent (60,700) had children who were exposed to the violence. These findings are supported by WHO data which "demonstrates the global nature and scope of domestic violence" (Marcus & Braaf 2007, p. 3). Laing (2000, p. 1) suggests that defining the experiences of children living in a violent household can be complex and the terms 'living with' or 'affected by' or 'experiencing' are being more widely used in Australian studies. The studies concur that children are not 'passive onlookers' and therefore seek to 'make meaning of their terrifying experiences'.

Consequently, the outcomes for children and adolescents affected by violence can be traumatic with the likelihood of long term consequences. Perry (2009, p. 241) suggests that ‘in the United States alone, there are millions of maltreated children and young people in the educational, mental health, child protective, and juvenile justice systems’. An international meta-analysis which examined children’s internalising, externalising and traumatic symptoms following exposure to domestic violence (Evans, Davies & Dilillo 2008) found that externalising symptoms were more robust in boys. The study reports on the ‘cycle of violence’ hypothesis originating from social learning theory (Ireland & Smith 2009) which links ‘exposure to severe parental violence’ during an adolescent period to violence in adulthood. A further study (Moylan et al. 2010, p.53) that examined both child abuse and domestic violence exposure in childhood with adolescent internalising and externalising behaviour found that ‘dual’ exposure increases the risk in both domains.

The personal stories of how extreme domestic violence impacted on school experiences were captured in an Australian study (Ashkar & Kenny 2009). Of the 16 participants, four had witnessed violence towards their mother and furthermore the violence had impacted on their school attendance. The study found that the violent behaviour perpetrated by the young offenders at school was reflective of the violence modelled in the family home. The concern was that the schools were not aware of the home situation and were ineffective in dealing with the situation. Risk factors for conduct disorder and delinquency were outlined in findings from a longitudinal study (Murray & Farrington, 2010, p. 636), which found that ‘cruel’ parental attitudes were related to antisocial behaviour. A paper on violence in families presented at the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 1993 (Blanchard 1993) found that children’s voices are not sought around the experiences of domestic violence in the home. The study found that the children welcomed the opportunity to share their experiences and feelings and that the children’s comments were ‘revealing and illuminating’ (Blanchard 1993, p.5). The study found that schools were ideally positioned to teach children about domestic violence and include them in the discourse. Nevertheless, children’s voices continue to be ignored. Recent UK research (Macdonald 2017) found that children’s disclosures to the courts ‘regularly disappeared from report recommendations’ (Macdonald 2017, p.1).

Early identification of trauma symptoms in children exposed to domestic violence is crucial and particularly relevant during the early years of schooling. Additionally, support for parents to help regulate their own negative emotional arousal and distress is also important in order that they can be more optimistic about their ability to cope Lieberman & Van Horn (1998 cited in McIntosh 2003). The long-term consequences for children exposed to family violence are outlined in a US study (Riggio 2004). The study found that these children experienced increased anxiety, relationship problems, alertness related to conflict, and the increased likelihood of violence in their own relationships. The researchers also found that this dysfunctional behaviour continues into adulthood. Studies that focused on the relationship between behavioural problems and substance use cited ‘conflictual family environments’ and ‘high levels of environmental stress’ as predisposing factors (Mulvey, Shubert & Chassin 2010, p.3).

The past few decades has seen robust debate relating to the impact of trauma and neglect on the development and plasticity of the brain. Perry (2009, p. 253) recommends that an ‘awareness of key principles of neuroscience and neurodevelopment can improve practice, programs, and policy in child maltreatment’. The child growing up void of sensitive caregiving is likely to experience psychological and developmental damage (McIntosh 2003; Perry & Pollard 1998). It is now recognised that interconnected neurobiological structures are set in motion by stressors associated with childhood trauma, and as such, impact significantly on the development of cognition, emotional and behavioural regulation (De Bellis 2001). It is further recognised that the timing of developmental experiences produces different outcomes. For example, Perry (2009 p. 243) concludes that ‘...somatosensory nurturing...will more quickly and efficiently shape the attachment neurobiology of the infant in comparison to the adolescent’.

The physiological outcomes of trauma and neglect can be profound and longstanding. De Bellis (2005) outlines studies which imply that neglected children are more likely to externalise behaviour due to stress-induced serotonin dysregulation. A further study which considers Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), neurodynamics and memory (Arden 2011), discusses the need for clients to emotionally engage with their traumatic memories to recover. Children who experience neglect and trauma are therefore at significant disadvantage and risk of emotional, psychological and social problems, compared to those children whose developmental needs are

met. Additionally, this risk is compounded when the child experiences a learning disability. A case study that considered mental health assessment frameworks for children and adolescents with learning disabilities (Friedlander & Moss 2008, p. 37), concluded that ‘good mental health requires good early attachment to a carer, successful management of drives and instincts, achievement of developmental milestones, achievement of independence and a place in society’. This systemic view is supported by (Garbarino & Collins 1999) via an ecologically grounded systems approach as outlined initially by Forrister (1969). The approach portrays an understanding of the interconnectedness and interplay between systems and the intended and unintended consequences. In families prone to neglect, the normal process may be distorted. A significant concern is that early developmental delay may result in subsequent IQ deficit.

The transition to school and adjustment within the school environment can be particularly difficult for children who have experienced attachment issues and parental conflict. One US study (Sturge-Apple et al. 2008) that explored school adjustment associated with parental emotional availability, interparental conflict and classroom engagement difficulties. The study found that these children were at risk of psychological problems. The findings demonstrated that children’s internal representations relating to conflictual family relationships, impacted on adjustment at school through the gradual erosion of a sense of security and safety. These insecure representations are found to have a deleterious impact on children’s ability to negotiate developmental tasks, bond within the school environment and, in the longer term, offset maladaptive defensive mechanisms, for example, hostile attribution biases. That is, to misinterpret the behaviour of others as threatening and/or aggressive.

Further research (Twenge & Im 2007), proposes that socially isolated children display deficits in pro-social skills, such as moral reasoning and empathic sensitivity to others in distress. The child’s emotional system is likely to ‘shut down’; they can mislabel others and perceive they are being taken advantage of (hostile attribution). The participants in the Twenge and Im (2007) study were psychology students who were placed under threat of social exclusion for a short period of time and it is interesting to note that the laboratory experiment of being excluded resulted in a negative outcome for the participants. For marginalised families and children exposed to social exclusion on an ongoing basis their outcomes could be wide reaching.

### *2.2.8.3 Poverty and homelessness*

A report released in 2006 by the Australia Bureau of Statistics (ABS) following a Census count, calculated the homeless population in Australia at 105,000. Of this number, 26 percent or 26,790 were homeless families and children (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). An increased population coupled with a slight increase in homelessness are reflected in the 2011 statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). The issue of homelessness is supported by international research (Stearman 2009).

A Homelessness Australia report noted that the two main reasons that families are without a home are domestic and family violence, and the shortage of affordable housing. The impact of homelessness on families and individuals are multiple and may include a decline in an individual's physical and mental health wellbeing, social isolation, transience, disrupted education, and relationship problems. What is known is that 'transient' families with children are less likely to access support, school and health services. Additionally, relationships and social connectedness, seen as key protective factors against many forms of abuse and an indicator of pro-social behaviours, may be compromised (Perry 2009, p. 248).

Homelessness can severely impact on the Government's responsibility to monitor an infants' progress from birth onwards. Calvert and Smith (2004) in reviewing the evidence found that infants from low socio-economic status backgrounds were more likely to experience developmental delays. Additionally, their parents were less likely to access services and are therefore more likely to visit hospital casualty departments.

There is a clear and understandable relationship between homelessness and poverty (Coll et al. 1998). Additionally, there is also a relationship between poverty and school achievement (Brown et al. 2010). It is reasonable that when parents' energy is focused on the core problem of obtaining accommodation, other concerns, for example, the child's developmental needs, may be overlooked and this in turn may impact on academic achievement (Parkes et al. 2007). Homelessness and poverty are therefore envisaged as a significant risk factor related to low academic achievement and antisocial behaviour.

#### *2.2.8.4 Cultural factors*

The overrepresentation of Indigenous offenders located within the criminal justice system, and the realisation that the needs of this group are not being met is articulated by researchers (Day 2003; Carcach, Grant & Conroy 1999; Cunneen & McDonald 1997). Furthermore, there is notable debate in the research literature regarding the need to tailor programs to meet the requirements of minority groups (Peterson 2010; McBrien 2011; Wilson, Lipsey & Soydan 2003; Mals, Howells, Day & Hall 2000). Peterson argues that an awareness of subtle cultural differences is needed when working with children and youth across a range of cultures.

A meta-analysis undertaken by Wilson, Lipsey & Soydan (2003) reviewed the effectiveness of mainstream programs for cultural minorities within a juvenile offender context. The research selected 305 studies from a large meta-analytic data base in which the samples comprised at least 60 percent white youth. The findings suggest that programs were equally effective for cultural minorities, showing no significant difference between minority and white samples in relation to - academic achievement, behaviour problems, self-esteem, employment status, peer relations, internalising problems, attitudes, school participation, family functioning and psychological adjustment.

While youth offender rates remain constant in most Australian states, a trend is evident in the Northern Territory as outlined in the 2008-2009 statistics which identify 6,031 offenders per 100,000 persons (ABS 2011). Of further concern is the progression from youth crime to the adult system with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners comprising just over a quarter of the total prisoner population. The imprisonment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was 14 times higher than non-Indigenous prisoners at 30 June 2010. An Australian study undertaken by Halsey (2008 p. 96), comparing the biographies of young, incarcerated males concludes that, the Indigenous ‘...participants evince extensive custodial histories ...poor literacy and numeracy levels ...as well as culturally specific issues (petrol sniffing, social isolation and alcohol abuse)’.

Intervention and treatment of racial minority groups by those in authority draws awareness to the issue of discrimination. A US study citing Farrington (1973 in Welsh 2001) found that while race minority groups were over represented in police or court statistics, smaller gaps were found



in self-report measures. The literature suggested three explanations, that is, police and courts may be demonstrating bias towards minority groups, minority groups were underrepresented in the survey, and variation across ethnic groups. More recent studies (Centre for Multicultural Youth 2014 (CMY) 2014; Johnson et al. 2009; Kjellstrand & Eddy 2011) comment on discrimination against racial minorities and the disparities in the processing and the decision making undertaken by the criminal justice system.

The culture of peer subgroup membership, from young peoples' perspectives, brings a sense of 'belonging, identity and status' (Ashkar & Kenny 2009, p.360). Enmeshed within these groupings are other cultural factors such as alcohol and substance use (Young, Sweeting & West 2007). Key findings reported by Ravulo (2016) demonstrate variance in ethnic communities and the need to tailor programs to meet issues related to cultural diversity. The requirement for services, such as law enforcement agencies, to reflect the needs of multiculturalism in their recruitment and other policy areas is of paramount importance (Shepherd & Purcell 2015). Cultural issues therefore are pertinent to young people in general, their school experience, and risk factors related to their life journey.

#### *2.2.8.5 Intergenerational criminality*

Several longitudinal studies report on the transmission of criminal and antisocial behaviour within families from one generation to another (Savage, Palmer & Martin 2014; Kjellstrand & Eddy 2011; Frisell, Lichtenstein & Langstrom 2011; Farrington et al. 2001). Frisell, Lichtenstein and Langstrom (2011) in their study of more than 12.5 million individuals using a 'nested case-control design', investigated violent crime in Sweden from 1973-2004. This seminal study found a strong family correlation between first generation members. However, the study also found that this relationship decreased for distant relatives. The above research findings are supported by a further UK study (Farrington et al. 2001). This study followed participants from eight to 50 years of age in which the arrest of family members, particularly fathers, was a predictor of a young male's delinquency.

Risk patterns associated with intergenerational criminality cite both genetic and environmental factors. These factors can be summarised to include 'lower family income, parental education, parental socioeconomic status, and parental health [parenting styles] ...and youth problem

behaviours...' (Kjellstrand & Eddy 2011, p.18), sibling influence (Ashkar & Kenny 2009), and role modelling (Frisell, Lichtenstein & Langstrom 2011; Halsey 2008). A small Tasmanian study of six known criminal families (Goodwin & Davis 2011) found that the father's influence in both male and female children was strong. The study concluded that a male child born into a criminal family had a 66.9 percent probability of acquiring a criminal record.

The relationship between family criminality, parenting strategies and youth adjustment related to antisocial role modelling, mental health problems, and educational opportunities are concerning (Kjellstrand & Eddy 2011). An excerpt taken from a young South Australian male prisoner (Halsey 2008, p. 103) states '...my uncle didn't have no one to go and steal with him, so he just asked me, and I just said, 'yeah okay'...' The study detailed prisoner demographics which showed that 60 percent of the young offenders had severe literacy problems and 75 percent experienced alcohol and other drug problems. A further study (Ashkar & Kenny, 2009) found that six of the 16 young males in custody had parents with a criminal history and five had siblings. Violent behaviour therefore was reinforced within the family unit. Halsey (2008) concludes that for some young offenders, custody can present as less violent and more emotionally secure place than their home environment including neighbourhood. Research suggests a holistic solution to the problem of intergenerational antisocial and criminal behaviour, one that focuses on issues of '...financial hardship, educational and occupational disadvantage, poor health and parenting issues ...' (Kjellstrand & Eddy 2011, p. 33). Farrington (2007) proposes four possible explanations as to why offending trends are clustered within families. Firstly, the multiple risk factors; secondly, the impact of environmental mechanisms, thirdly, the likelihood of genetic mechanisms and, finally, the official (police/court) bias against criminal families.

## **Summary**

This section details several causal factors that can influence the trajectory for young males from entry into school, adjustment and bonding within the school environment to difficulties that may arise at school resulting in behaviour problems, early school departure and the onset of pro-criminal behaviour. Theoretical concepts pertinent to this pathway, from infancy through to adolescence, are reviewed from a biopsychosocial context. The literature demonstrates that peer

influence is particularly relevant for males and a likely strong predictor of behavioural problems. Studies show that for those children born into criminal families, the journey can be an overwhelming complex situation with high numbers following a similar pathway to their family kinship.

### **2.3 Learning and other disabilities that influence school outcomes**

Previous research identifies an association between reading, language and learning disabilities and disrupted education (Snow et al. 2015; Mallett 2014; Snow & Powell 2008; Elbeheri, Everatt & Malki 2008; Selenius et al. 2006; Snowling 2008). Additionally, academic failure related to learning problems can result in early school departure and impact significantly on an individual's future employment and life opportunities (Ashkar & Kenny 2009; Halsey 2008).

A research project undertaken by Halsey (2008, p. 96), in which he compared the biographies of young offenders sentenced to custody, concluded that they experienced poor literacy and 'most [were] expelled from school prior to year 10'. Since September 2003, the author carried out 100 initial and follow-up in-depth interviews with young males (n=50) aged 15 to 23 years across seven custodial facilities. The aim of the project was to understand the participant's pathway to crime, experiences of custody and concerns around release. A further Australian study that examined the experiences of 16 incarcerated, adolescent male offenders (Ashkar & Kenny 2009, p. 363) identified that learning difficulties were clearly related to contextual factors, for example, 'boredom, peer distractions, preoccupation with personal problems' and in a small number of cases attributable to individual factors of a psychiatric and neurological construct. Additionally, these difficulties were compounded by poor relationships with teachers in which young people felt 'disconnected [and] feared embarrassment and humiliation in front of their peers' (Ashkar & Kenny 2009, p.363). They were often influenced by their peers and conscious of peer scrutiny, engaging in behaviours that supported their self-concepts. Acting out was related to expressions of frustration, anger, hopelessness and disappointment. The study found that 10 of the 16 participants had a learning difficulty. The above two research projects capture the experiences and beliefs of some marginalised young males. It may be the first time that they have been able to express their opinions and ideas about their life journeys, the difficulties of school and entry into crime.

There is considerable debate about the underlying causes of learning difficulties. One argument identifies under-stimulation in the home environment; whereas others recognise cognitive neurobiological dysfunction as a cause (Selenius et al. 2006). Additionally, within a neurobiological dysfunctional paradigm, learning deficits can be further subdivided into categories such as: oral language disorder (Snow & Powell 2008); specific learning disorder (Catts et al. 2005) and dyslexia (Shaywitz & Shaywitz 2008; Catts et al. 2005; Lyon 1995). The incidence of learning deficits leading to antisocial behaviour can be tracked historically and the problem is not necessarily related to intelligence. Perceptual disturbances in young offenders, identified that auditory perceptual deficits influence academic performance (Zinkus & Gottlieb 1983). The problem is likely to be evident before the child commences school, and therefore impacts on their view of the environment, leads to poor self-esteem, and relationship problems with peers, acting out against the system, and culminating in antisocial behaviour. This research finding is in line with more current research which shows one area of learning disability originating from difficulties with phonological processing (Snowling et al. 2000; Catts et al. 2005; Elbeheri, Everatt & Malki 2008).

The seed for low academic achievement is likely planted and nurtured during the formative early years of life. Additionally, learning opportunity is more often influenced by parental educational levels. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG), in its report titled 'National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development: Baseline performance report for 2008' September 2009, found that '...60 per cent of working age people in the most disadvantaged socio-economic areas have low literacy skills compared with 29.3 per cent in the least disadvantaged areas' (Dyslexia Working Party, Shorten Report 2010). The Shorten report was developed following meetings with representatives from: *AUSPELD (Australian Federation of Specific Learning Difficulty Associations)*; *LDA (Learning Difficulties Australia)*; *ALDA (The Australian Learning Difficulty Association)*; *Speech Pathology Australia*; *DDOLL (Developmental Disorders of language and Literacy)*; *Sir James Rose (author on the Rose Report on Dyslexia commissioned by the UK Government)*. The working party was concerned that dyslexia is not recognised as a specific

disability under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and that people with dyslexia are not recognised within the education and employment arena.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics detailed in its 2006 report that almost half of all Australians aged 15-74 had poor literacy levels (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2008). The concern is that literacy levels are on a downhill spiral. Furthermore between 2000 and 2006 Australia dropped 4 places in the international ranking of literacy levels when measured by the OECD's International Program for Student Assessment (PISA). In 2004 the Federal Minister for Education commissioned a National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL) of which 20 recommendations were made. The recently established Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) reported that 'many students when learning to read need systematic attention to fundamentals like phonological and phonemic awareness, and sound-letter correspondences as well as the development of skills in using semantic and syntactic clues to making meaning' (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) 2009, p.7). ACARA concurred that if curricula were delivered in a structured, sequential and explicit manner in conjunction with intensive intervention, many students needs would be met. A concern however is that 5-10 percent of children continue to struggle despite this intensive intervention. This group of children is termed 'dyslexic'. Sound literacy skills are essential to the health and wellbeing of all individuals and those who struggle in this arena are likely to experience gaps that impact on their economic, social and personal wellbeing. Several studies demonstrate that the incidence of dyslexia is more pronounced in the prison population than the general population (Elbeheri, Everatt & Malki 2008; Snowling et al. 2000).

### **2.3.1 Defining dyslexia and incorporating contemporary findings**

From the 1980's there has been much discussion and debate concerning the learning disability dyslexia (Pennington 1990). However, neuroscientific evidence at the forefront of research in this area reports that 'the very act of reading has become visible' (Shaywitz & Shaywitz 2008, p. 1329). Several theories have been proposed to gain an understanding of dyslexia, with the phonological model receiving the most support (Snowling et al. 2008; Hogan, Catts & Little 2005; Catts et al. 2005; Gillon 2004). However, new evidence suggests comorbidity with other disorders, for example, attention problems such as attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) (Shaywitz & Shaywitz 2008; Duncan et al. 1994).

Lyon, Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2003, p. 2) have revised the definition of developmental dyslexia as follows:

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterised by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction...

Current research reporting on the intellectual capacity of dyslexic children is consistent with recorded observations documented over a hundred years ago by Morgan (1896 cited in Shaywitz & Shaywitz 2008, p. 1333). The British physician when commenting on a fourteen-year-old boy stated, 'he has always been a bright and intelligent boy ...in spite of labourious and persistent training; he can only spell out words of one syllable...he would be the smartest lad in the school if the instruction were entirely in oral ...'

Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2008, p. 1343) conclude that 'evidence from laboratories around the world now demonstrate a neural signature for dyslexia, that is ...a disruption of posterior neural systems serving reading'. Their findings report '... unequivocal evidence that what was once a hidden disability is real' (Shaywitz & Shaywitz 2008, p. 1343). Additionally, this competing view has challenged earlier findings that the process is automatic and not related to attention problems such as ADHD, now seen to play a crucial role.

The relationship between dyslexia and antisocial and subsequent offending behaviour in young people is well documented (Elbeheri, Everatt & Malki 2008; Selenius et al. 2006; Kirk & Reid 2001). Given that dyslexia 'is defined by a significant discrepancy between *full-scale* IQ and reading ability' (Snowling, Gallagher & Frith 2000, p.230), students with dyslexia, whether diagnosed or otherwise, are likely to experience significant difficulties at school unless programs are specifically designed to meet their needs.

### **2.3.2 Relationship between dyslexia and specific language and learning impairment (SLI)**

Studies have looked at the distinctiveness of dyslexia as compared with specific language impairment (SLI) and learning disability (LD) (Catts et al. 2005; Bishop & Snowling 2004; Lyon 1995). There are reported similarities between the disorders and additionally that they are distinct disorders with different cognitive deficits and behavioural presentations.

Catts et al. (2005) in their study reported that, although SLI is usually diagnosed during preschool years, problems during this period could be an early manifestation of dyslexia. In addition, approximately 15-20 percent of children identified with dyslexia in grades 2, 4, and 8 met the criteria for SLI in kindergarten. Children at risk of dyslexia may be identified through a family history of reading disability (Snowling et al. 2003; Gallagher, Frith & Snowling 2000). Lyon (1995, p. 9) argues that 'dyslexia is one of several distinct learning disabilities'. As such, it is 'not synonymous with the general term learning disabilities'. Lyon recommends the discontinuation of the term LD when discussing reading disabilities and instead discusses specific disabilities within the context of coherent and operational domains.

Following their review of the behavioural, neurological, and genetic evidence, Bishop and Snowling (2004) conclude that SLI and dyslexia should be treated as two different but overlapping developmental disorders. Ehhardt (2008) argues that dyslexia once provided an ancestral advantage. Many people with dyslexia excel mechanically, can perceive ideas in picture form, and are logically gifted. It is suggested that the ability to think three dimensionally hinders the organisation of information in other ways. He further suggests that dyslexia is likened to family resemblance, similar features but a different face.

Dyslexic children are known to have poor ability to encode spoken words into short term memory (Selenius et al. 2006), that is, impaired phonological awareness. They also have poor memory for digits, especially when distracted. However, they do have good visuospatial intelligence performing better than non-dyslexic people in visuospatial tests. Dyslexic children will tend to compensate with this ability and manage information globally rather than sequentially (Selenius et al. 2006).

Lyon (1995) outlines three reasons to clearly define learning disorders such as dyslexia. Firstly, key symptoms need to be identified. Secondly, that early intervention and teaching methods are

based on informed understanding. Finally, that learning disorders require a clear definition for research purposes. Furthermore, the absence of a definition leads to inadequacies in accessing special education. Beginning readers must be conscious of the sound segments in syllables and words and must be able to manipulate them on demand. Catts et al. (2005, pp. 1378-1379) conclude that studies show *dyslexia* is the ‘most widely investigated written language disorder’ and that *specific language impairment* is the ‘most widely studied developmental disorder.’ Rawson (1986) cites The Orton Dyslexia Society’s analysis of dyslexia, that the ‘*differences are personal...diagnosis is clinical ...treatment is educational ...understanding is scientific*’ (Rawson 1986, p. 181).

### **Language competencies**

Studies show that children commencing school who experience delayed language development are significantly more likely to have problems processing both linguistic and non-verbal information (Hay & Fielding-Barnsley 2009; Barrett & Hammond 2008). Oral language competency is a necessary requirement for the student’s interaction with others, the completion of tasks, and the development of attachment and bonding to others in the school environment. Further evidence suggests the relationship between poor language acquisition and low socioeconomic status as a significant risk factor in the cognitive and social development of children (Snow & Powell 2008; Snow & Powell 2005).

Oral language problems are often not diagnosed in childhood and adolescence and are therefore repeatedly mislabelled in school as deficits in reading and writing. Therefore, appropriate and effective intervention does not occur, and these ‘at risk’ young people may find themselves detached from school and on a trajectory into pro-criminal behaviour. A cross-sectional Australian study (Snow & Powell 2008, p.16) that examined the oral language abilities and social skills of young offenders found that they performed “significantly worse on all language and social skill measures, but the differences could not be accounted for on the basis of IQ”. While the findings in this study provide some evidence of a link between oral language deficits and youth offending, the effect sizes are likely to be underestimated given that young people with mental health problems were excluded from the study. A further Australian study (Ashkar & Kenny 2009) found that young people’s inability to express thoughts and feelings leads to



frustration, embarrassment in front of peers, and a sense of hopelessness. The young offenders self-reported an initial willingness to learn that was replaced with an inability to work independently and engage in learning. The over-representation of young males in “both juvenile offending and developmental language delay statistics” (Snow & Powell 2005, p. 2) supports the focus of this study which will look at the perceived school experiences of young males who become involved in criminal activity. Additionally, it can be argued that schools are able to implement strategies that support children ‘at risk’ of developmental language disorders by providing an environment that promotes the development of pro-social values and the acquisition of skills, factors that are often lacking within the family environment. These strategies are discussed later in this review.

### **2.3.3 Coping patterns in young people with learning disabilities**

Studies report that individuals with dyslexia and other learning disabilities adopt various coping strategies and mechanisms to manage their condition. Many individuals who successfully manage dyslexia are likely to be proactive, task focused and determined in overcoming barriers (Logan 2009; McLaughlin 2008). Others are prone to emotional based coping strategies such as frustration brought about by negative school experiences and criticism. This can result in low confidence, enhanced sensitivity to others’ criticism, self-doubt, and refusal to attend school (Edwards 1994). Additionally, other individuals will use avoidance-based coping (Mugnaini et al. 2009; Terras, Thompson & Minnis 2009) that averts attention and under-performance. According to Ryan (1994) this type of coping mechanism is often misinterpreted as laziness whereas it is more likely related to anxiety symptoms leading to confusion and apathy.

A positive, responsive school environment is a protective factor for young people with learning disabilities. One study that assessed the effects of audiobooks on the psychosocial adjustment of dyslexic students (Milani, Lorusso & Molteni 2010) concluded that the use of audiobooks resulted in improved academic performance and reduced emotional and behavioural disorders. This response to individualised learning strategies is reflective of the comments made over one hundred years ago by Morgan (1986 cited in Shaywitz & Shaywitz 2008, p. 1333) ‘...he would be the smartest lad in the school if the instruction were entirely in oral...’

Classrooms therefore can become a negative environment for students with learning disabilities. To avoid the embarrassment of being made to feel ‘dumb’, students may develop psychosomatic disorders and/or reject conventional values and seek compensation through antisocial and acting out behaviour (Ashkar & Kenny 2009). In many cases young people subsequently drop out of school.

While many young people with learning disabilities such as dyslexia fail to cope with the education system, it is evident that many individuals not only cope in later life but excel in specific environments within the workplace (Logan 2009; Elbeheri, Everatt & Malki 2008). One comparative study (Logan 2009, p. 1) that explored the incidence of dyslexia in entrepreneurs in both the UK and the US found in both populations ‘a significantly higher incidence of dyslexia in entrepreneurs than in corporate management’.

#### **2.3.4 Intellectual Disability**

Since the 1960’s there has been a steady rise in articles relating to intellectual disability (De Ruiter 2007; Hodapp & Dykens 2009; Einfled et al. 2010). While advances in research into intellectual disability have occurred the past 50 years, more knowledge is required (Hodapp & Dykens 2009).

Studies highlight the relationship between an intellectual disability and antisocial and maladaptive behaviors in children and adolescents (Tsiouris 2010; Einfeld et al. 2010; De Ruiter et al. 2007). While externalising behavioural disorders, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder, are more prominent in males, an Australian study (Einfled et al. 2010) (n.538, mean age 11.68) reported that gender effect in children with an intellectual disability was not that obvious. The researchers suggest that the findings may be related to enhanced language skills in girls despite overall impaired language development in children who experience an intellectual disability.

The transition to school for children with an intellectual disability can be particularly difficult due to deficits in cognitive and social performance. One comparative study of children with and without an intellectual disability (McIntyre, Blacher & Baker 2006) found that children with an intellectual disability had more negative school experiences. The researchers recommended programs that would foster and enhance social skills in the early years of schooling. A second

study that compared children with autism to those children with an intellectual disability (Brereton, Tonge & Einfeld 2006) found higher levels of psychopathology in children with autism compared with those with an intellectual disability. Additional research that looked at pharmacotherapy treatment of aggressive behaviours in individuals with an intellectual disability (Tsiouris 2010, p. 1) reported that ‘genetic disorders, early victimisation, non-enriched and restrictive environments during childhood or later and traumatic brain injury ...have been associated with aggressive behaviours’.

Children who present with borderline to mild intellectual disability, which is often undiagnosed, pose significant difficulties for school services, families and the young people in question. One comparative study (Weiss, Rosenfeld & Farkas 2011) of 48 borderline to mildly intellectually young people with disabilities, who had experienced emotional abuse, suggested that children with a lower IQ were more vulnerable to distress. Children therefore, who fall within the borderline to mildly intellectual disability spectrum, especially if undiagnosed and appropriately treated, are at considerable risk of behavioural problems at school and the onset of pro-criminal behaviour.

### **Summary**

This section outlines the serious psychosocial consequences for young people who experience language and/or learning disabilities that may go unrecognised, undiagnosed and untreated within the school system. The literature identifies that the early assessment, referral pathways, and management of these issues is crucial. It is also noted that learning disabilities do not necessarily come under the one umbrella. While there are similarities between the disorders, there are also specifics that relate to the individual disability types. Young people who experience learning disabilities adopt various coping strategies. While task focused strategies are positive in the short and long term, other strategies such as emotional coping or avoidance coping, are perceived as negative and therefore may result in school departure and pro- criminal behaviour.

## **2.4 School based strategies to prevent young people's transition into pro-criminal behaviour**

What can be inferred from a review of the literature is that schools are well positioned to provide a holistic setting that engages with, and supports young people, with the aim of minimising problematic behaviour. Furthermore, for those schools that adopt these principles, the benefits are significant. Schools can now draw on the 'What Works', GLM and additional body of research into youth offending in the management of young people presenting with behavioural problems. This requires a holistic, systemic model that focuses on educating the educators, programs for the young person and the family, and a community response.

The causes and treatment of youth offending are clearly outlined in meta-analysis studies (Sawyer, Borduin & Dopp 2011), general personality and social learning theories (Ward & Maruna 2007), and the Good Lives Model (Ward, Gobbels & Willis 2014; Ward, Yates & Willis 2011). While the research focus is youth offending, the models are adaptable and transferable across a range of programs and services including education.

### **2.4.1 Educating the educators**

The need for school policy makers, administrators and teachers to have knowledge of youth offender evidence-based models of intervention and their application is crucial if young people are to be diverted from pro-criminal behaviour. Fundamental to this knowledge is the ability to engage with a broad range of students, primarily those young people considered 'at risk' of failure and early school departure.

There is a body of national and international research within the adult and youth offender paradigm that outlines effective models of engagement, assessment and intervention (Trotter & Evans 2012; Andrews & Bonta 2010; Farrington 2007; Bonta & Andrews 2007). The client-worker relationship is core to effective engagement. Dowden and Andrews (2004) in their meta-analytic review of correctional practice discuss the importance of successful interpersonal relationships. An Australian study that examined the skills of probation officers during interview sessions with young offenders (n=119) (Trotter & Evans 2012, p. 270), concluded that effective workers are 'friendly, open, honest, engaging and enthusiastic'.

The engagement process is complemented by pro-social modelling and reinforcement (Trotter & Evans 2012; Andrews & Bonta 2010; Trotter 2006). This concept requires that the worker consistently model pro-social behaviours and attitudes, positively reinforce the same behaviours in the client, and subsequently in a parallel process, challenge pro-criminal behaviours. A third component involves role clarification. Teachers and workers have an apparent social control component to their role. A clear explanation of this mandate is needed during the early stages of engagement, along with an exploration of the clients' expectations. In other words - what is negotiable and not negotiable within policy guidelines. The appropriate use of authority is discussed in meta-analytical studies (Dowden & Andrews 2004). Training for new and existing teachers, that encompasses the above framework, is therefore needed to equip teachers with the skills required to engage with those students presenting with problematic behaviour. The investment will promote education and equality for all students and additionally add to a cohesive school environment.

#### **2.4.2 Screening and assessment in early education**

Appropriate assessment and screening is particularly relevant in the early years of schooling to identify all children at risk of academic and social failure (Betts et al. 2014; Burns, Dean & Klar 2004). For beginning students, particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, improving school readiness was the aim of a US program (Webster-Stratton, Reid & Stoolmiller 2008), the Incredible Years (IY): Teacher Classroom Management and Child Social and Emotional curriculum (Dinosaur School). The program's aim is to train teachers in effective classroom management and to promote parental involvement. Lesson objectives are set, and children are given homework that encourages parental involvement. The focus is to build social competence, enhance self-regulation skills and address conduct problems. A randomised trial involving 153 teachers and 1,178 students that evaluated the model found it to be an effective strategy to allay behavioural problems. The concept of school readiness is also supported by an Australian study (Murray & Harrison 2011). A US intervention '*All Children Experiencing Success, School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Program*' was delivered to third, fourth and fifth grade students (Betts, Hill & Surface 2014). The aim of the program was to improve behavior and reading levels. Posttest evaluation showed a positive reduction in externalised behavior and improved reading levels.

Research in oral language competence (Snow & Powell 2008; Snow & Powell 2005) shows a strong correlation between oral language competence, literacy problems and antisocial behaviour. A significant concern is that, if the underlying problems are not assessed and behavioural problems emerge, parents and teachers will often target the presenting behavioural disturbance rather than the cause. An Australian study that assessed the language competence and social skills of youth offenders (Snow & Powell 2008) found that sixty-four percent of the young offenders left school around Year 8 with deficits in language and social skills. Furthermore, the findings cannot be explained by group differences in IQ. The authors also found a strong link to social disadvantage. Snow & Powell (2005) suggest that there is a place in schools for speech pathologists to strengthen oral language competence. This would serve as a protective factor for all children, particularly those children considered 'at risk'.

Studies report a correlation between dyslexia and antisocial behaviour (Elbeheri, Everatt & Malki 2008; Kirk & Reid 2001; Snowling et al. 2000). However, over the past 20 years, research that has focused on a definition of dyslexia (Catts et al. 2005; Lyon 1995) largely identified deficits in phonological processing ability. A study (Shaywitz & Shaywitz 2008, p. 1329) used 'powerful tools of modern neuroscience' to identify a neural signature that provides irrefutable evidence that dyslexia is a real condition. These findings challenge the concept of a 'phonological code' and present a new theory which suggests that, children diagnosed with dyslexia also have associated attention problems like those children diagnosed with ADHD. The study (Ibid, p. 1343) found that 'the dyslexic reader may be able to decode words but is still not able to read quickly and continues to be at a disadvantage compared to non-dyslexic peers' when in the process of undertaking tests. A search of the literature did not identify any primary or secondary schools that promote ongoing assessment for dyslexia as part of their curriculum. However, two articles were found that supported assessment in higher education (Farmer et al. 2002; Hatcher et al. 2002). Given that 'dyslexia is a specific learning disability of a neurobiological origin (Shaywitz & Shaywitz 2008, p. 1333), and additionally that the individual's literacy is below that expected due to their intelligence, thorough assessment and screening is considered paramount.

Screening for dyslexia remains a challenge for schools, health professionals and parents. However, advances in functional magnetic resonance imaging has provided insight and hope to children with the condition. Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2008, p.1343) recognise the potential for pharmacologic agents that already play a role in the treatment of ADHD may provide insight into the 'neurochemical mechanisms of reading and dyslexia and their relationship to those mechanisms in ADHD'.

A further area of concern relates to those children entering school with psychosocial problems whose families are characterised as having multiple and complex issues. Research that reports on this area includes Bromfield et al. (2010); Renzaho & Karantzas (2010); Perry (2009); van den Bree et al. (2009); De Bellis (2005); Riggio (2004); and McIntosh (2003). A search of the literature recommends a school-community approach, as outlined in articles from the US (Dryfoos 2005) and the UK (Cummings, Todd & Dyson 2006). Dryfoos (2005) advocates for full service community schools that provide a range of services that involve parents in collaboration with government and the private sector. A similar model is supported in the UK article.

However, according to Winkworth and McArthur (2008, p. 5), Australia is 'lagging behind' other countries in recognising the values of such programs. They did however comment on one program that was launched in the ACT in 2001. The Schools as Communities (SAC) program aims to improve the social and learning outcomes for children considered at risk of school failure because of abuse and neglect by engaging with families and schools. This is achieved by employing skilled community outreach workers (mostly social workers) to provide links and support to high risk children and families. An evaluation of the SAC program in 2005 (Winkworth & McArthur 2008, p. 12) found that '... the Schools as Communities program has demonstrated a range of positive social and school outcomes for vulnerable children, young people, their families, their school and their local communities'. The researchers acknowledge however that those Australian policy administrators are remiss in not recognising the benefits of social workers and other human service workers being incorporated into such programs. If programs such as these were adopted, schools would then be, according to Winkworth and

McArthur (2008, p. 5) the ‘hub or centre for human services’. This would result in children being appropriately screened and assessed during the early years of schooling.

A thorough review of the literature relevant to school-based prevention and intervention programs, with a focus on behavioural and/or cognitive behavioural treatment approaches, was undertaken in the UK by Reddy et al. (2009). The review found that children in the first few years of schooling benefited from several programs including, *First Step to Success* (early screening by school; home and school intervention involving parent, teacher, and peers; teacher component involves token economy system and behavioral reinforcement; home program used by parent to do behavioural training with child at home); *Parent Teacher Action Research* (PTAR) approach (a collaborative approach involving parents, teachers and professionals utilising a whole-class social skills instruction and universal screening to all students); *multimodal parent, teacher, family service workers* (two day workshops offering parent group training); *day treatment program* (play therapy, psychodrama, pet therapy, art therapy social skills training, occupational therapy, daily group therapy). Findings related to middle school are discussed in the next section.

In summary, screening needs to separate out the problems while at the same time recognising areas of comorbidity. An opportune time for this screening to occur is during the first two years at school, a time before the child realises that they are different from others in the classroom. At this stage problems may be related to oral language competence, specific language disorders such as dyslexia, and cognitive and social problems related to disadvantage and familial problems.

#### **2.4.3 Programs to address and prevent behavioural problems**

In the UK in the mid 1990’s several innovative programs were implemented within the ethos of ‘preventative social work’, to address what was a sharp rise in school exclusions associated with family breakdown (Winkworth & McArthur 2008). This whole of education approach was possible, given the silo structure of education in the UK. However, in Australia the states and territories are responsible for school education and, as such, ad hoc programs are often piloted but not necessarily sustained. The funding for these programs is more often shared across various government departments and agencies. Additionally, practitioners implementing such programs



may not be fully supported. Andrews and Wormith (1989, p. 298) argue that administrators may intentionally undermine the transfer of academic-based knowledge in what they describe as ‘knowledge destruction’. Carver (2004 in Lipsey et al. 2010, p. 35) concludes that ‘effective use of ‘off-the-shelf’ program models requires significant start-up costs, great care, and strong sustained ties to the original program developers’.

A review of the literature has found several international studies that seek to address behavioural problems within the school setting. In Norway, an evaluation of a program originating out of the US, referred to as the Second Step program (Holsen, Smith & Frey 2008), found that boys in grade six involved in the program reported lower levels of externalising problem behaviour. The program promotes social-emotional competence in young people by teaching social skills. The program aims to decrease aggression and other problem behaviours. The Norwegian study involved 1,153 fifth and sixth grade students across 11 schools (Holsen, Smith & Frey 2008, p. 71). The program is classroom based and uses ‘developmentally sequences lessons’ that are implemented twice weekly. The model is drawn from social learning theory (Bandura 1989) and social information processing theory (Crick & Dodge 1994). A limitation of the study was the absence of a comparison group.

A further UK study (Reddy et al. 2009, p. 1) mentioned in the previous section, examined ‘the outcome literature on school-based prevention and intervention programs’ from a behavioural and cognitive behavioural treatment perspective, reporting on 29 investigations involving 1,405 children and adolescents. The study separated out school-based prevention programs and school-based intervention programs. In the middle years of schooling, programs that were found to be effective included *peer-based social skills training*; *parent training* (parent trained in child self-management and homework completing); *individual treatment plan* (psycho-education, case management, individual therapy, coping groups, summer camp); *comprehensive psychological treatment in school-based therapeutic environment* (involves teachers, therapists and social workers). Several other programs were also evaluated.

As seen in the UK, programs are normally implemented from a re-active rather than pro-active stance and therefore are more likely to occur during the middle years of schooling when the problems are evident. One UK program (Hayden 2008, p. 31), namely the Youth Offending

Team (YOT) is established in every local authority in England and Wales. It comprises representatives from ‘the police, probation services, and officers dealing with health, education, drugs and alcohol misuse, and housing’. However, YOT practitioners conclude that children and young people have more likely exited mainstream education if found suitable for YOT. Another UK program, the Protective Behaviours program was developed and implemented to address issues of safety and citizenship. In Australia under *The Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Schools*, policy argues for a multi-faceted response to address *primary prevention, early intervention, intervention, and restoring well-being* (Cann 2002). The Protective Behaviours program comes under this umbrella as a crime prevention approach. The program which aims to equip students to manage issues of peer pressure, abuse and bullying is normally delivered by teachers at the classroom level. In Western Australia, the program is being utilised in detention centres. A search of the literature did not find an evaluation of this program.

At a local level, one jointly funded program originating in 1999 that provided intensive outreach support to young people at risk of early school departure, the Early School Leavers (ESL) Program, formerly known as the Young Offender Pilot Program (YOPP) (Clifford 2002), was found to be effective in meeting the needs of young people at risk of exiting school. This program has now been disbanded. Another evidenced based family mediation program that has its beginnings in work with families and young offenders is the Collaborative Problem-Solving model (Turner 2012; Trotter 2006). There is no reason why this program could not be utilised as a preventative program within the school system. Gray (2005) reported on the experiences of young offenders’ measure of social exclusion. The study found ‘... the two most common problems were related to young people’s situation at school (90 per cent) and family life (75 percent) ...’ (Grey 2005, p. 949).

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development implemented a new *Partnership Agreement* (State of Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2014). The partnership is between the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Victorian Community Sector. The vision is to ‘improve the learning and development outcomes for all Victorians’ (State of Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2014, P. 3). As well as other concerns, the

initiative will ideally support those young people experiencing problems due to culturally specific issues and those at risk of homelessness. Baker et al. (2008) conclude that youth gender and cultural background needs consideration in order that young people adjust to school and form sound relationships with teaching staff. Lowe et al. (2008) in their overview of theoretical predictors of antisocial behaviour in schools report a need for gender-specific programming. A longitudinal population-based study of factors related to homelessness (van den Bree et al. 2009) reports that schools are clearly in a position for the early identification of young people at risk of homelessness.

In youth offender meta-analysis studies, group and individual programs that address emotional dysregulation, social skill development and family problem solving are identified as effective. The models are easily transferrable to the school domain.

#### **2.4.4 Multidisciplinary health services**

Several International studies (Bromfield et al. 2010; Alexander-Passe 2006; Cummings et al. 2006; Dryfoos 2005) and Australian studies (Hay & Fielding-Barnsley 2009; Winkworth & McArthur 2008; Farrell 2006; Snow & Powell 2005) recommend an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach to manage the health and wellbeing of children and young people in schools. This approach is needed to provide an early intervention and preventative service to children and young people at risk of academic and social failure.

Winkworth and McArthur (2008, p. 5) idealise the school environment as the ‘hub or centre for human services’. Given the complex and multifaceted mental and other health problems that can emerge from the very first day of school for some children and, additionally, that community specialist services may not be aware of these problems, schools are a key entry point for screening and intervention. These services may include speech and language pathologists, psychologists, social workers, mentors, alcohol and drug clinicians, and nurses. Families form part of this integrated model. This multidisciplinary approach is supported by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Salmon & Kirby 2007). The WHO recommends an integration of mental health promotion in schools, secondary prevention for ‘high risk’ children and referral to specialist mental health services for children with psychiatric disorders. This would provide a service to those children normally out of reach of services.

One multidisciplinary health model situated in schools in the US is the School-Based Health Clinic (SBHC) (Salmon & Kirby 2008). The clinic provides primary health care services. An expansion of the model, Expanded School Mental Health (ESMH) provides comprehensive mental health services for young people through the provision of assessment, multi-modal treatment, consultation and preventive strategies. This program is available to all children. The cost effectiveness of such programs, both short and long term, may be evident in savings in the child protection and other services (Bromfield et al. 2010). Practice informed by key findings in developmental neurobiology could also allow for creative strategies as recommended by Perry (2009, p. 253) such as, ‘massage, yoga, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), music and movement’ to be incorporated into conventional mental health models.

The practice of locating mental health services in schools is not widespread in the UK although Salmon and Kirby (2008) report that the service delivery model is on the government agenda. One multi-agency service that has shown to be an effective model of collaboration between education, health and other services is the Behavioural and Educational Support Teams (BEST). Although not specifically located in schools which is a detriment, BEST practitioners include behaviour support staff, clinical psychologists, education welfare officers, educational psychologists, health visitors, primary mental health workers, school nurses, social workers/family workers, and speech and language therapists.

#### **2.4.5 Specialist programs**

School services could consider meta-analytical studies undertaken in youth justice, from the ‘What Works’ literature (Lipsey et al. 2010), when allocating students with behavioural problems to specialist programs. The ‘What Works’ suggest that effective programs include multiple services, counselling, skill building and restorative models. In relation to counselling type programs there is an emphasis on, in order, group, mentoring, mixed and family counselling programs. In skill building programs, there is a focus on cognitive-behavioural, behavioural, and social skills programs.

Children with dyslexia could be offered creative learning strategies and tools that focus on a strength-based perspective (Ehardt 2009). For example, many dyslexics excel mechanically,

they perceive whole ideas (3D), can solve problems and are logically gifted; they recall pictures as opposed to words (Ehardt 2009). There is a concerning trend that young people with dyslexia are over represented in the criminal justice system. Therefore, according to Elbeheri, Everatt & Malki (2008, p. 99) ‘advice and support from specialist staff may also be necessary to develop dyslexia/special needs compatible systems’.

Over the past 250 years the social fabric of Australia has changed with the influx of migrants and refugees. This has occurred in waves. The recent trend includes people from African descent, with 23 percent aged between 10-24 years identifying as African born (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). To respond appropriately, teachers and school administrators require insight, awareness and knowledge about the situational circumstances of the young person outside of the school environment and the influence this may have on the young person. If this holistic assessment is missing, the young person may be labelled as deviant. The development of relationships within the school/family mesosystem from an ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner 1979) - (teacher/student; student/peers; teacher/family; parent/child; school/community), and difficulties associated therein, are core elements to successful transition from home to school and from primary to secondary school for all students.

#### **2.4.6 Whole of school approach**

The role of teachers and administrators within specific school environments is an important criterion to student’s outcomes, particularly for those students at risk of behavioural problems and early school departure. A holistic approach to child wellbeing, within an educational context, is the focal point of global initiatives. The focus being on child-friendly and health promoting schools (Langford et al. 2015; Orkodashvili 2013; Narvaez & Vaydich 2008; Welsh 2001). Randomised control trials undertaken by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Langford et al. 2015) identified 67 eligible trials with a focus on health issues. The premise was that schools are an important setting for student health promotion. The health promoting framework incorporated: school curriculum, ethos and/or environment, families and/or communities for students aged four to 18 years. The data base covered a broad range of countries, including Australia, and a range of issues that covered physical activity, nutrition, bullying, tobacco, alcohol, mental health, violence, sexual health, accident prevention, eating disorders, sun

protection and oral health (Langford et al. 2015, p. 3). The review found that the Health Promoting Schools framework is effective in enhancing some areas of student health and shows promise in other areas. A framework espousing a child- friendly school environment was developed by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (Orkodashvili 2013). The ethos is on child-friendly educators who focus on the needs of the 'whole' child within a family community context. Examples of child-friendly schools in Rwanda and Mozambique were discussed in Orkodashvili's (2013) paper. The framework can help mobilise communities in relation to education and children's rights (Orkodashvili 2013, p.108).

Separating out the causes of school behavioural problems was reported on in a study undertaken in the US (Welsh 2001, p. 943), with a recommendation that 'school disorder can be reduced by conscious efforts on the part of school administrators, teachers, parents, students and community groups'. The authors suggested that individual schools should adopt the Effective School Battery, a 118-item measure that focuses on students' perception of the school environment. The tool covers '...School Safety, Clarity of Rules, Fairness of Rules, Respect for Students, Student Influence in School Affairs, and Planning and Action ...' Additionally, '...measures of involvement in school activities, positive peer associations, belief in school rules, effort at school, and school rewards' are also assessed (Welsh 2001, p. 943). An important role of teachers and administrators therefore is to establish a supportive school climate with a focus on relationships in which students feel secure, safe and cared for (Narvaez & Vaydich 2008).

Part of this continuum is the investment in teacher education and training. An Australian study related to young offenders' perceptions of school (Ashkar & Kenny 2009), concluded that there is a need to place more emphasis on influences within the school environment. The study recommended that teachers are specifically trained in the management of students exhibiting behavioural problems. This approach may help divert young people from academic failure and behavioural problems (Ashkar & Kenny 2009). A critical element in this process is the educators' role in the modelling and reinforcement of pro-social values and behaviour. Research that is comprehensively covered in studies undertaken by Andrews and his colleagues and Trotter (in Trotter 2006) in their work with involuntary clients. These workers' skills are transferrable to all domains in which sound relationships play an important role in client

outcomes, or in the case of education, student' outcomes. This also includes engagement with families. In this approach, workers model and reinforce pro-social behaviour and challenge anti-social comments. Additionally, role clarification, the use of empathy, and problem solving are important components of the model.

#### **2.4.7 The opportunity for a narrative**

A review of the literature found limited oral history studies that reported on the school experiences of young males who present with school difficulties and pro-criminal behaviour. One related article that gave a detailed overview of adult prisoners' autobiographies (Nellis 2002) gives some insight into the contribution that life histories can make to the area of criminality. One well known prisoner, Jimmy Boyle commented that he was expected to fail at school therefore delinquency was inevitable. According to the author, the 'life history' gives workers insight into comparisons between the then and now and 'taps into the humanity of offenders' (Nellis 2002, p. 436). However, it is recommended that workers need to be mindful that at times the reliability of these personal stories may be questionable and therefore need to be balanced within a theoretical construct. This premise is clearly related to social cognition theory as outlined in a study by Fiske & Taylor (1991 cited in Riggio 2004, p. 111) '...individuals build cognitive representations of critical events, objects, and people (including themselves) that are heavily relied on as the bases of perception, interpretation, and subsequent behaviour'.

A review of Australian literature found a couple of studies. One article (Halsey 2008) detailed the rich personal stories, including pathways to prison, of young incarcerated male offenders aged 15 to 23 years. The study reported that 5 to 10 percent were illiterate, 60 percent had literacy and numeracy levels below the functional level, and 60 percent did not complete Year 10. Multiple other background problems were evident including significant illicit substance use. Childhood physical, emotional and psychological abuse was a reoccurring theme throughout the stories. The second study (Ashkar & Kenny 2009, p. 355) examined factors relevant to the 'family- school mesosystem' and the subsequent development of antisocial behaviour in 16 adolescent male offenders who were sentenced to maximum security detention. The rich narratives in this study gave a comprehensive overview of factors within the school system that they perceived led not only to academic and social failure but also a pathway into problematic

behaviour and juvenile crime. Twelve of the 16 participants reported that they ‘hated’ school. Ten participants found that they could not difficult to learn and work independently. There were comments such as ‘...if you can’t read or write, how you supposed to do school work?’ High levels of frustration and stress in the classroom, and poor relationships with teachers, compounded the problem. Most of the young people turned to antisocial peer groups for support. One young person commented ‘...getting involved with ém ...just made me...fit right in...’ (Ashkar & Kenny p. 359-360). Although the classroom environment was a significant factor related to problems, other concerns also underpinned their difficulties. Eleven of the participants came from broken homes, four had experienced extreme violence within the home environment, six reported family criminal histories, and issues of homelessness and transience were also evident. Ashkar & Kenny (2009) concluded that, from their review of the literature, that there was a dearth of published studies that examined young offenders’ perspectives of their lived school experiences.

#### **2.4.8 Government response**

Considering the cost effectiveness of quality care in early childhood, it appears that some governments and organisations are making a committed and coordinated effort to raise awareness of the benefits of investment in children’s care and wellbeing. This is reflected in the Australian governments’ 2006 *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy* (SFCS) 2004-2009 (Farrell 2006), which draws on international principles as outlined in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (1989), along with a twenty-country study of early childhood education and care conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Starting Strong 11* (2006). This framework focuses on:

- intervention considering risk factors and protective factors in families and communities – with an impact on child outcomes;
- building capacity in community-led development and service using a strengths-based approach;
- partnerships among public, private and community sectors;
- innovative and flexible policy implementation and evaluation; and



- links between investment in the early years and future national prosperity.

The above framework is supported by leading national organisations such as Australian Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), National Investment for the Early Years (NIFTeY), and Early Childhood Australia (ECA) (2006). However, there is little evidence of the transfer of benefits with many marginalised families whose developmental health outcomes are considered poor (Calvert & Smith 2004). The authors comment on a report titled *A Head Start for Australia: An Early Years Framework*. The report cites several groups within the community that do not fare well including, Indigenous peoples, marginalised families who experience poverty and mental health problems. In addition, individuals who experience abuse, have a disability, live in out of home care and suffer from mental health problems form part of this population.

The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) commenced in all Australian schools in 2008. Children are assessed for literacy and numeracy in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). Although it would still be considered early days in relation to critique and evaluation of this program, several studies have critiqued the model (Murray & Harrison 2011; Fielding-Barnsley 2010; Unsworth & Chan 2009). Unsworth and Chan (2009, p. 245) conclude that ‘reading in today’s world necessarily entails sophisticated integrative processing of meanings afforded by the combination of images and language, NAPLAN does not reflect the multimodal conceptualisation of reading comprehension’. Children experiencing behavioural, learning and language problems, concerns that may or may not be evident before the Year 3 NAPLAN assessment, will not only find the assessment stressful but they are also likely to have poor outcomes. Additionally, this may not be related to cognitive ability. Shaywitz & Shaywitz (2008) conclude that reading difficulties are not necessarily related to poor cognitive abilities.

## **Summary**

The aim of this study was to capture the thoughts and feelings of the participants with the firm belief that their expert opinions will add to the knowledge base. The literature supports this construct. This section has identified that a holistic, integrated and multidisciplinary approach is required for children and young people at risk of academic and social failure, with the school envisaged as the ‘hub of service delivery’ (Winkworth and McArthur 2008, p. 5). All young

people need to be given a voice, perhaps especially those considered ‘at risk’ of failure to engage and early school departure.

## FRAMEWORK

TARGET GROUP	PROGRAM
School administrators/ teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training in Pro-social Modelling, Role Clarification and Relationships to enhance engagement with students</li> </ul>
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biopsychosocial assessments</li> <li>• Group programs skills training (Mindfulness/emotion regulation/interpersonal)</li> </ul>
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mediation – Family Problem Solving Model</li> <li>• Information/support sessions</li> </ul>
Specialist services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School as hub (working together strategy) including psychologist, social worker, speech therapist, cultural worker, access to specialist services if required.</li> </ul>

**Table 1 - Proposed intervention framework**

A review of the literature identifies an overwhelming consistency about what is needed to support young people who are considered ‘at risk’ of failure within the education system. Additionally, a systemic approach is needed to improve service provision for those families experiencing multiple and complex problems (Renzaho & Karantzas 2010; Broomfield 2010; van den Bree et al. 2009). Early identification, diagnoses, assessment and treatment of comorbid

conditions such as ADHD, specific learning disabilities and language disorders is recommended (Burns, Dean & Klar 2004; Duncan et al. 1994; Pennington 1990; Zinkus & Gottlieb 1979). Furthermore, the school context and environment are seen to play a key role in the support of young people at risk of failure (Ashkar & Kenny 2009). This may include gender specific programming (Lowe et al. 2008; Baker et al. 2008), and preventative programs to address issues of antisocial and maladaptive behaviour (Lipsey et al. 2010; Hayden 2008; Cann 2002; Welsh 2001).

Given that mental health and substance abuse problems can be a barrier to an individual's academic and social outcomes while at school, the need for an integrated, multidisciplinary approach involving specialist services, for example, speech pathology, psychology, occupational therapy and social work is discussed (Snow & Powell 2008; Patel et al. 2007; Farrell 2006; Alexander-Passe 2006; Bickel & Campbell 2002). The role of teachers and administrators is also important. Studies recommend ongoing training and support in order that staff are aware of issues related to concerns including antisocial behaviour (Hemphill et al 2007). Effective training will therefore enable educators to make informed decisions.

## **2.5 Research gaps**

There is overriding consensus in the literature that within the larger school population there lays a subset of students whose learning and developmental needs are not being met. This may result in problematic behaviour, academic failure, early school departure and the onset of criminal activity. It is also recognised that this group can be further subdivided as follows.

Problems related to *family social and economic dysfunction and disadvantage* and the subsequent impact on a child's cognitive and social development has been extensively researched (Renzaho & Karantzas 2010; Brown et al. 2010; Edwards & Bromfield 2009; Perry 2009; Parkes, Stevens & Spence 2007; Marcus & Braaf 2007; Murray & Farrington 2005; Calvert & Smith 2004; Reid et al. 2003; McIntosh 2003; Laing 2000; Eisenberg & Mussen 1989). Programs that focus on early intervention, that are inclusive and systemic involving parents, teachers and specialist services and located within the school system which subsequently becomes the 'hub or centre for human services' is recommended. Given that Australia appears to be 'lagging behind' other countries (Winkworth & McArthur 2008, p.5), it is argued that we

could look to the US for guidance with their *First Step to Success* and *Parent Teacher Action Research* programs. These programs incorporate universal screening of all students and early intervention involving families, teachers and professionals.

Children with *Learning and other disabilities* are also widely researched with this subgroup, and while recognising issues of comorbidity, this group can be further sub-divided into language disorders (Snow & Powell 2008; Snow & Powell 2004) specific learning disorders including dyslexia (Shaywitz & Shaywitz 2008; Selenius et al. 2006; Catts et al. 2005; Lyon 1995), and intellectual disability (Tsiouris 2010; Einfeld et al. 2010; Hodapp & Dykens 2009; De Ruiter et al. 2007). Appropriate screening of children at the early stage of schooling utilising specialist services along with the development of programs to meet the specific needs of those children is required. Yet again, if the school is the ‘hub’ of service delivery these services would ideally be positioned within the school environment.

However, in most schools this screening does not occur, or occurs in an ad hoc fashion and children therefore fall between the gaps. Academic failure and behavioural problems become evident and schools reactively look to the research and programs that will alleviate the problems. A wealth of research covers this area (Hemphill et al. 2010; Murray & Farrington, 2010; Ashkar & Kenny 2009; Trotter 2009; Hayden 2008; Lowe et al. 2008; Patton et al. 2006; Gray 2005; Welsh, 2001; Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990; Andrews et al. 1990).

At this stage schools could look to meta-analytical research from the youth justice ‘What Works’ literature (Lipsey et al. 2010) for evidence-based programs that are shown to be effective. Programs include multiple services, counselling, skill building and restorative models. In relation to counselling type programs there is an emphasis on, in order, group programs, mentoring, and family interventions. In skill building programs, there is a focus on cognitive-behavioural, behavioural, and social skills delivery. Additionally, family problem solving programs, such as those espoused by Trotter (2006), are recommended. A whole of school approach is required with the role of teachers and administrators within specific school environments seen as an important criterion to student outcome. Teacher training in the use of pro-social modelling and reinforcement (Trotter 2006) is suggested. Finally, children and young people need to be legitimised and their voices heard and acknowledged. As Black observes

(2010, p. 470) ‘the greater failure about which educational systems should be concerned is the failure of schools to enable the democratic participation of the most excluded young people’.

### **Chapter summary**

A review of studies relating to the school experiences of children and young people at risk of academic and social failure has highlighted several themes, as well as gaps in the knowledge base. The important areas identified in the examination of the literature can be addressed in this study through the following general research question.

**From young male offenders’ perspectives, how do school experiences relate to offending behaviour?**

In answering this research question five related research questions are posed:

**What was the young person’s experience of their school work and educational environment and were there referrals for supplementary support?**

**What were the young person’s issues pertaining to family and the home and surrounding environment, and how did this impact with their outcomes at school?**

**Did school related problems influence the onset of pro-criminal behaviour?**

**What were the young person’s post-school experiences?**

**Would the addition of a focus group to comment on the findings, involving representatives from schools, justice and young services, assist credibility?**

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: THEORY AND PROCESS**

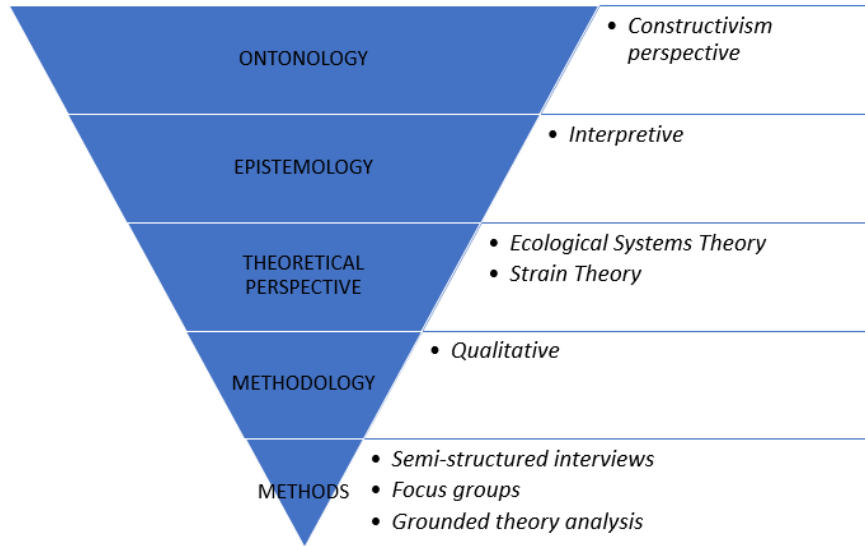
### **Sections 1-7**

#### **3.1 Introduction and study intent**

This chapter examines the methodological framework developed to address the study's aim to investigate how school experiences relate to offending behaviour from the perspective of young male offenders.

Direct personal experience can form the basis and the starting point for research (Silverman 2013). The researcher's own experience of working within the youth justice system for over two decades from a person-centered modality, and an understanding of the need to give participants a 'consumer voice' to validate the authenticity of their lived experience, has guided the research approach. This process, however, can be clouded by researcher bias and subjectivity. Therefore, by following a protocol and methodological framework, bias can be negotiated and partially controlled.

Qualitative research can be described as the study of the empirical world from the perspective of the person being studied. This point of view is underpinned by two suppositions. Initially, that behaviour is influenced by naturalistic enquiry, that is, the physical, sociocultural, and psychological environment. It involves observation and interaction with people in their own environment. The second component rests with the researcher whose task it is to unearth the underlying subjective meanings and perceptions of the participants (Krefting 1991, p. 214). The researcher is not looking to test a hypothesis. This study is concerned with understanding the personal meanings and elucidation of the participants, to obtain their views and experiences of the school and justice system, and to elicit themes that may underpin a trajectory into pro-criminal attitudes and behaviours. The methodological framework adopted to cover this process is developed by Crotty (1998) and represented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2 - Research model**

### 3.2 Ontological and epistemological approach

Ontology can be described as the nature of reality. What is out there to know? What makes up social reality or social phenomena from which a theory is based? Ontology forms the starting point for all research whether that be positive ontology that accords a single, external and objective reality to a research question regardless of the researcher's belief (Carson et al. 2001). Researchers adopting a positive ontology will remain detached from the subjects, rely on statistical and mathematical techniques, and employ logical and rational approaches. The 'objectivism' perspective conceptualises social phenomena existing independent of social actors (Grix 2002).

A contrary ontological position, and the one chosen for this study, identifies a subjective view of knowledge, a 'constructivism' perspective. This position asserts that social phenomenon is located within a value-added, socially constructed paradigm that permits the researcher to take a more personal and flexible approach. Interpretivists deem that there can be more than one reality and more than a single structured way to access these realities. Additionally, these realities are in a constant state of revision. The knowledge may have multiple meanings and therefore be difficult to interpret (Lincoln & Guba 1985) and relies on socially constructed and subjective

interpretations. For example, how is an aspect of the social world constructed by participants in the study?

Epistemology focuses on the knowledge gathering process and is concerned with how we come to know what we know, that is, the methods, validation, and ways of gaining knowledge (Grix 2002). The researcher's place and time in the overall social and political fabric, their life experiences influenced by cultural norms and parameters, and perception of self, other people, and the world will shape the epistemological position. An awareness that the position will differ from other researcher's ideology is fundamental to the process. All research is prone to bias and therefore requires critical reflection and objectivity.

The concept of Verstehen (empathic understanding) originating from the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) is embedded within interpretative social science (Neuman 1994). This paradigm reflects how participants feel, how they create meaning of their perceived social world. This anti-foundationalist approach to the study of social capital (Grix 2002) is a responsive and appropriate methodology for the current study, given that the participants constitute a small number of in-depth cases, (that is, 20 semi-structured interviews).

### **3.3 Theoretical and conceptual framework**

As mentioned above, several theories are influential in explaining the developmental pathways of young males that influence a trajectory into pro-criminal thinking and behaviour. The author had preconceived ideas around theoretical concepts, for example, attachment theory (Perry 2009), social learning theory (Bandura 1977), critical theory (Broido & Manning 2002), and strain theory (Leiber & Peck 2014). However, following the interviews, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979) made sense as an umbrella in which other theories sat. This was due to the multicultural mix of the participants.

### **3.4 Research design**

The system of 'acquiring knowledge and establishing its truth' is referred to as scientific enquiry (Polgar & Thomas 2008, p. 1). This system enables service providers to justify evidence-based delivery of services, and requires a method that permits the description, prediction, and explanation of the phenomena being studied (Polgar & Thomas 2008). There is considerable debate, over many centuries, about the type of method of enquiry. Early philosophers, such as



Descartes, Bacon, Galileo, Newton and Harvey, are at the forefront of scientific method. Polgar and Thomas (2008, p.5) note that early philosophers point to these basic elements as:

1. *Empiricism*. ‘...enquiry ought to be conducted through observation and knowledge verified through evidence.
2. *Determinism*. ...events in the world occur according to regular laws and causes. The aims of research are to discover these rules and causes.
3. *Skepticism*. ...any proposition or statement ....is open to analysis and critique.’

Influenced by these forbearers the doctrine of positivism was developed by Auguste Comte, a 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher. Positivism holds the view that society, like the physical world, operates according to general laws; we observe, hypothesised and theories are generated. Introspective and intuitive knowledge are rejected. The methodology relies on experimental and manipulative methods that ensure distance between the subject and the researcher (Cohen and Crabtree 2006). It seeks the ultimate truth and demands ‘objectivity, structure and predictability’ (Miller and Crabtree 1999a, p.8).

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the positivist view of scientific method was challenged, and it was argued that ‘human values form an integral part of scientific inquiry’ (Polgar and Thomas 2008, p. 9). This study rests upon exploring a richness and depth of experience from the participants, who are experts in their own life. The researcher’s task is to try to understand how participants view the world and how power relationships are expressed through language. Additionally, how this is also influenced by societal power and structures. The study therefore does not fit with the positivist paradigm. On the contrary, the study’s aim is to explore how the phenomena is ‘experienced’ (naturalism) or constructed in peoples’ everyday activities (constructionism) and to ask the question ‘what is going on here’ (Silverman 2013, p. 103).

### **3.5 Qualitative research**

It is argued that standards of rigour apply to all research and that deficits occur across the board whether the research is quantitative or qualitative. All research, when applied within a rigorous methodological framework, can provide important findings (Rubin 2000, p. 173). The author (p. 174) argues, and agrees with Padgett (1998), that problems with rigour arise firstly when there is

uncertainty about what the ‘standards for rigour are or should be’, and secondly when researchers ‘think that qualitative inquiry means anything goes’ (Rubin 2000, p. 174).

Qualitative or interpretative research investigates individuals or groups in their social settings (Polgar & Thomas 2013). Thus, the researcher seeks to understand or comprehend the lived experiences of people in their social setting. The approach is considered disciplined and therefore underpinned and guided by clear methodological principles. As Polgar and Thomas (2013, p. 84) argue, these principles are imperative in ‘defining problems, collecting and analysing the evidence, and formulating and evaluating theories’. A small sample size is consistent with a qualitative research approach. Silverman (2013, p. 54) argues that ‘the validity of qualitative research depends more on the quality of the analysis than the size of the sample’. While recognising that direct personal experiences can be the starting point for research, a qualitative approach can adopt a Socratic line of interviewing within a semi-structured framework. This is achieved by avoiding early hypothesis and asking the question, ‘what is going on here?’. It explores how phenomena is ‘constructed’ in the everyday life of the participant. Qualitative research is an enabling process in that it allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities and meanings in peoples’ lives, as Silverman argues, ‘what kind of social world do the speakers make happen in their talk?’ (Silverman 2013, p. 20).

While qualitative research is embedded within a structured design and data gathering framework, the process is initially holistic and flexible. Once the data is gathered and themes start to emerge, the process starts to narrow or syphon. The process therefore is holistic providing an approach in which we seek to understand persons in their social environment. We create meanings from their lived experiences, from their perspectives as experts in their own lives.

### ***Ethical considerations***

A key component of all research is the consideration and mindfulness of how the study may impact and impinge on the participants’ lives and wellbeing. The process therefore is measured by the extent to which it conforms to, or complies with, a set of standards and conventions that oversee the study. Polgar and Thomas (2008) argue that the following components guide researcher’s ethical considerations:

1. The need to question who is likely to benefit from the research. Ideally in relation to this study, by drawing awareness to the participants' educational experiences and subsequent pathways, the sharing of these lived experiences with a focus group, and publication of the findings, it is envisaged that small, positive changes may eventuate. Additionally, the study aims to contribute to the general knowledge base in this area which in turn may influence the development of social policy.
2. To ensure that the informed consent of the participants is obtained in an ethically acceptable manner, that they fully understand the process and that risks are minimised. To manage this issue, the current study confirmed that the Explanatory Statement and Consent Form were provided to potential participants in person prior to the interview to limit the possibility of coercion and ensure informed consent was obtained.
3. To ensure protection of participants. While this study did not involve experiments, it nevertheless could have led to deleterious effects to participants through the exploration of school, family and criminal activity. To help eliminate the distress of recounting events during the interview, the researcher made sure the Explanatory Statement, signed by the participant, advised him that he could withdraw at any time during the interview, especially if he was distressed. If this occurred the participant was offered support, and if necessary, follow up counselling via a referral to the YSAS counsellor or another counsellor if he did not wish to use the YSAS counsellor.
4. The researcher should seek to minimise discomfort during the interview process and not take a proprietary view that participants need to experience uneasiness to contribute to scientific research. Person centered skills, with a focus on paraphrasing participants' responses in a sensitive manner, was needed to elicit pertinent information within a safe environment that was conducive to exploration of issues. Silverman (2013) argues that you do not need a large sample so long as there is quality in the analysis of a small sample.
5. Coding of real names was used in this study to protect privacy. Researchers undertaking qualitative research need to be particularly mindful of privacy in order that participants are not identified through the transmission of comments.

6. The next issue was of relevance to this study, given that participants were drawn from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Community values were different and needed to be taken into consideration by the researcher. Participants for this study were randomly recruited from Maori Pacific Islander (n=8); Africa (n=8); Australia, including 1 Indigenous (n=5); and Thailand (n=1) backgrounds.
7. The final and important aspect is the conservation of resources, and the subsequent need for the researcher to be diligent and consistent in the application of sound research methodology.

Attention to the above aspects should ensure that participants are fully cognisant and informed of the research process and that their rights are always respected.

While there are no general rules for sample size in qualitative research, the sample size will align with what the researcher wants to find out, what will be useful and credible with the resources that are available (Grinnell & Unrau 2008). The saturation concept is rooted in grounded theory. The concept is important to identify when enough data has been collected (Bowen 2008).

### **3.6 Purpose of the study**

This research is consistent with an exploratory research design in that the goal is to discover ideas, perspectives and insights into the participants' experiences of school and how those experiences may lead to involvement in pro-criminal behaviour. Exploratory research seeks to understand the problem by seeking an answer to the 'what' question:

- What was the young person's experience of their school work and educational environment and were there referrals for supplementary support?
- What were the young person's issues pertaining to family and the home and surrounding environment, and how did this interact with their schooling?
- What problems related to the onset of offending behaviour and/or peer involvement, including suspension or expulsion from school?
- What were the post-school experiences for the young person?

- Would the addition of a focus group to comment on the findings, involving representatives from schools, justice and young services, assist credibility?

It is argued that exploratory research is valuable in identifying new ideas in an area in which limited information is available (Neuman 2004). The two contrary purposes of research are descriptive and explanatory. A descriptive qualitative study can be referred to as an ethnography. It is written from the perspective of the participants; readers are encouraged to make their own interpretations (Polgar & Thomas 2008). Descriptive purposes are also relevant to this study in that they look to answer the ‘how’ questions. The purpose of explanatory research is to explain rather than describe the phenomena being studied and is therefore quantitative in nature. It seeks to measure the relationship between variables and test hypotheses (Given 2008).

### **3.7 Constructing the study’s participants**

#### **3.7.1 Participants**

Defining participants suitable for this research study is impeded by the ability to locate and define participants within other studies. We do know that youth within Australia make up a significant percentage of the total offender population and that the trend is a concerning one. Statistics published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007 suggest that almost a third, 29 percent of the total offender population in Australia is made up of youth aged between 10 - 19 years (Beard & Aalders 2011). The over-representation of youth as offenders is a trend that is reflected in the youth offender rate of 3,785 offenders per 100,000 persons aged 10 - 19 years. Furthermore, while numbers appeared to be on the rise from 2.2 per 1,000 persons in 2005-2006 to 2.5 per 1,000 persons in 2008-2009 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011) (AIHW) and a 4 per cent increase in youth offending between 2009 and 2010 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011) (ABS), more recently there has been a decline in youth offending in Australia 2008-09 to 2015-16, except for illicit drug offences which almost doubled, and sexual assault and related offences (ABS 2016),

The task of the researcher was to locate a service or agency in which ‘at risk’ young males were likely to self-refer or be referred by other agencies or departments. The participant’s role is to reflect on their lived educational and pro-criminal experiences. The researcher’s knowledge of

the youth justice system and referral pathways led to the recruitment locality. Dandenong, the location of a Victorian branch of the Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS) was chosen as the recruitment locality to seek a sample to examine the educational experiences of young males (n =20), aged 16-21 years. Given the transitory nature of the participants involved in the study, a premeditated approach to the sample size (n=20), as opposed to a saturation concept, was employed. It is argued that this approach is not necessarily consistent with the principles of qualitative research and the concept of saturation (Mason 2010). Nevertheless, other experienced researchers agree that 20 is an optimal number of participants for qualitative research (Green and Thorogood (2009). YSAS aims to ‘engage, support and strengthen vulnerable young people affected by drug and alcohol use, mental illness and social disconnection [criminal behaviour and exclusion or absence from school] to improve their health, wellbeing and participation in the community’. It is envisaged that, overall, their educational experiences will be negative; have led to early school departure, antisocial and criminal behaviour.

Young males were invited to take part in the research project. Single interviews were arranged at a suitable pre-determined time to have minimal impact on the operations of the service. The interviews were semi-structured and largely open ended to encourage the ideas of the participants. Participants were given a small gift to the value of \$AUD 50 (store voucher). They will be provided with a summary of the findings and were offered a list of suitable community supports relevant to education, training and employment in their locality.

### **3.7.2 Focus group participants**

A recommendation from the panel following the Confirmation of Candidature was the inclusion of a focus group with representatives from schools, justice and youth services to comment on the findings, assist credibility, and to validate the evidence derived from the study. It is envisaged that the findings of the research may assist teachers and other people working with ‘at risk’ young males to have a better understanding of their issues within the family-school mesosystem and the subsequent pathway to offending behavior. Focus group members were selected from departments, agencies and services that are likely to be involved with the study participants. Representatives from primary and secondary schools, special schools, youth justice and youth services were invited to take part in a focus group in Dandenong. The outcome and changes that

occurred with the focus group are discussed in Chapter 6. Members will be provided with a summary of the findings.

### **Chapter summary**

Chapter Three has reported on the research methodology, theory and process. The aim of this study was to capture the lived school experiences of young males aged 16-21 and to explore how those experiences may have influenced a trajectory into pro-criminal behaviour. The ontological position identifies a subjective view of existing knowledge, a 'constructivism' perspective. The epistemological position is shaped by the researcher's place and time in the overall social and political fabric – how we come to know what we know, and while several theories may underpin this research project, ecological systems theory forms the basis and complements other theoretical constructs.

Because the researcher seeks to understand or comprehend the lived experiences of people in their social setting, a qualitative research methodology is used. A review of the literature found that the group chosen for this study are rarely consulted, a silent minority. Two small focus groups, one in Dandenong and the other in Geelong were conducted. The study recruited representatives from primary and secondary schools and youth services. The purpose of the focus groups was to respond to the collated themes that emerged from the interviews with the young males, and to reinforce the findings.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODS**

This qualitative study provides an exploration of young males' experiences of school and how those experiences may have influenced a trajectory into pro-criminal behavior. The qualitative model adopted aims to capture the thoughts and feelings of the young males with a firm belief that their expert opinions will add to the knowledge base. Diligence was paid to rigour and trustworthiness.

### **Sections 1-4**

#### **4.1 Setting and demographic**

##### ***Regional demographic***

This research took place in the geographical region of the City of Greater Dandenong, a local government area located in the South-East Melbourne, Victoria. The 2006 ABS Census Basic Community Profile (DPCD Spatial Analysis and Research Branch July 2009) reported that Greater Dandenong covered a land area of 129.5 (km<sup>2</sup>) and had an estimated resident population of 130,751 with a median age of 36. Over 51 percent of the population were born overseas and over 55 percent speak another language at home. The median income per week was \$AUD 342 and over 43 percent of the population were not in the labour force. By comparison, within the local government area of Yarra, the reported weekly income was \$AUD 653 and around 26 percent were unemployed.

#### **4.2 Research procedure and implementation**

##### **4.2.1 Data collection schedule**

1. Discussion with Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS) management.
2. Formal approval (letter) from YSAS (Appendix 1).
3. Meeting with the YSAS Dandenong branch manager and board member.
4. Presentation to YSAS Dandenong staff members in relation to the study and recruitment process.



5. Participant flyer developed inviting young male YSAS clients aged 16 – 21 years, who have been involved with the justice system, to take part in the study (Appendix 3). The participant wrote his phone number on the flyer and was contacted by the researcher to arrange an initial appointment to go over the explanatory statement (Appendix 6) if willing to participate. An appointment time was arranged for the interview.
6. The participant signed a consent form prior to the commencement of the interview. The researcher revisited the explanatory statement.
7. A self-report participant demographics questionnaire was completed (Appendix 4).
8. A voice recorded interview took place.
9. Participants were handed the gift voucher at the completion of the interview.
10. When the participant left the room, the researcher wrote a small paragraph on the participant's presentation and any key points.
11. The researcher transcribed the interviews.
12. An excel data base was developed to allocate themes.
13. Data was analysed.
14. Finding were taken to the focus groups for input and discussion around the collated themes.

#### **4.2.2 Initial discussions with recruitment organisation (YSAS)**

The researcher found that prior knowledge of the recruitment organisation assisted in the recruitment of participants. This view is supported by Grinnell and Unrau (2008). Over the years there has been a close collegial involvement and relationship with YSAS management and staff that centered on information sharing via meetings and workshops, and individual client consultation, referral, social casework and counselling. Formal approval for the research project, a letter from YSAS Director of Services, was received by the researcher on the 2 April 2012 (see Appendix 1).

Many challenges face researchers in the recruitment of suitable participants. These challenges are outlined in a study of eight health graduate students conducting qualitative research (Namageyo-Funa et al., 2014). The study found that it is important to build trust with the participants and the gatekeepers when undertaking qualitative research. Successful recruitment rests primarily with the organisation that provides services to the participant and as such, in the case of YSAS being a voluntary organisation, it is likely that the organisation would have the participants' trust (Renert, Russell-Mayhew & Arthur 2013). Additionally, face-to-face interviews are considered conducive to the recruitment process (Spratling, Coke & Minick 2012). While the researcher worked closely with YSAS clients in the past, for the purposes of this study, participants were not known to the researcher. YSAS management and staff held the view that the research was important, and the knowledge generated would be beneficial to the client group.

Following YSAS' formal approval to undertake recruitment, the researcher attended a team meeting with YSAS staff to present an overview of the study. The presentation detailed: a rationale for the study, the type of participant suitable for recruitment, exclusion criterion, procedural steps, how participants are selected, the recruitment process, and the explanatory statement and consent form.

#### **4.2.3 Participant recruitment process**

This research adopts a non-probability, purposive sampling method which has a focus on richness and depth as opposed to numbers. The study selected young males, aged 16-21, who attend Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS), a program that supports 'at risk' young people. The service aims to 'engage, support and strengthen vulnerable young people affected by drug and alcohol use, mental illness and social disconnection [criminal behaviour and exclusion or absence from school] to improve their health, wellbeing and participation in the community'. Silverman (2013) argues that a small sample is appropriate if you have thought through its limitations and the quality of the analysis is adequate. It is therefore essential that the researcher employs an analytical and critical approach to the data. Polgar and Thomas (2008, p. 37-38) concur that with purposive sampling 'cases for inclusion in the research are likely to be illustrative of particular issues or circumstances'. The researcher has chosen this theory-based

sampling within a critical theoretical construct to explore how the participants 'personal meanings and actions are influenced by [their] social environments' (Polgar & Thomas 2008, p. 292). This research project is based on the view that societal structures, power relationships and negative social environments can influence pathways, nevertheless there is potential for reconstruction (Broido & Manning 2002).

Young males (n=20), aged 16-21 years referred to the Dandenong, Victoria branch of Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS) were invited to take part in the research project. A feature of voluntary participation is that participants who agreed to be involved may be different to those who did not want to be involved, in ways not related to sampling measures, thus self-selection may be evident (Costigan & Cox 2001).

The researcher's intention to exclude female participants was due to the over representation of males within the criminal justice system and her long-term experience of working primarily with young male offenders within the custodial and community sector. Statistics show that males outnumber female offenders three to one and that the distribution is similar across states and territories (ABS 2011). It is envisaged that, overall, their educational experiences will be negative, and will have led to early school departure and pro-criminal behaviour.

One off semi-structured interviews were arranged at a suitable pre-determined time that aimed to have minimal impact on the operations of the service. The interview questions were primarily open-ended and followed the participants' ideas within a semi-structured framework. The interview process, as a data collection method, was introduced in the 1970s and 1980s following the integration of qualitative research into clinical research (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006). Semi-structured interview questions are commonly used for qualitative research either with individuals or groups. Predetermined, open-ended questions lead into a dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006, p. 315).

#### ***4.2.3.1 Recruitment procedure***

Following ethics approval (see Appendix 2), the recruitment process commenced in March 2013. The final interview took place in January 2014. In total, 22 young males were interviewed. However, two participants were eliminated from the study because they had no prior or current justice involvement.

A participant flyer (see Appendix 3) was given to the YSAS coordinator and staff to inform suitable clients about the study. Interested clients signed the bottom of the flyer and left a telephone number to be contacted by the researcher. A locked box was left at the site to ensure confidentiality. This process was utilised on a couple of occasions. In most cases a suitable participant was introduced to the researcher by the coordinator or case manager at the YSAS site. The researcher went through the explanatory statement which explained the study's purpose, the participant's involvement, his rights, the process, reimbursement and confidentiality. Each participant was given a copy of the explanatory statement (see Appendix 6) and encouraged to discuss the contents with his family and/or his worker. An appointment for the interview was made later. Voluntary consent was emphasised throughout the process.

#### ***4.2.3.2 Data collection overview***

Prior to the interview, a private office was booked with reception staff to ensure confidentiality and noise reduction. The researcher welcomed the participants and ensured that they were comfortable. The researcher confirmed that the participant was cognisant of details pertaining to the explanatory statement. If so, the consent form to take part in the study was signed. Demographic data (see Appendix 4) was collected. This data included: date of birth, family constellation, cultural background, involvement with child protection and/or mental health services, year level education, why the participant left school, any further education, illicit substance use and alcohol use, including the age commenced, police involvement, and the main offences.

#### ***4.2.3.3 Data collection methods***

There are various methods available for data collection. These range from questionnaires, open ended and closed interviews, and observational methods. The method chosen will depend on the type of study, the costs and benefits/ advantages and disadvantages of the methods. It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that the data collection strategy is reliable (replicable) and valid (accurate) (Polgar & Thomas 2008). Patton (2002, p.347) argues that interviewing strategies, for example: unstructured, semi-structured or structured are not "mutually exclusive", and the different interviewing approaches, dependent upon the needs of the study, can be combined within the one interview.

The data collection method used for this study is a semi-structured interview in which the interviewer sets up a general structure by selecting in advance the area to be covered and the main questions to be asked (Drever 1995). The interview schedule was designed to elicit participants' lived experiences of school and other psychosocial domains that may have influenced their schooling. The predetermined questions enabled the researcher to pursue a basic line of enquiry. The conceptual framework for the interview questions evolved from a critical theoretical perspective related to the researcher's awareness and critical reflection of her lived work experiences with young males in the justice system. This process, however, can be clouded by researcher bias and subjectivity. By following a protocol and methodological framework, bias can be negotiated and partially controlled (Polgar & Thomas 2008). It was envisaged that the questions would complement and enhance existing theories, beliefs and prior research findings that evolved from the literature review.

A written list of questions (see Appendix 5) was used to guide the interviewer in a flexible and conversational manner within a framework that was meaningful and relevant to the research question. Semi-structured interviewing is more suitable to qualitative and small-scale studies. The benefits allow for detailed, rich data to be collected from participants.

Interviews can be conducted face-to-face or by telephone. This study involved face-to-face interviews that were audio recorded. Polgar and Thomas (2008, p.108-109) concur that face-to-face interviews that take place in a 'natural' setting enable the development of trust, speedy engagement and observation of non-verbal cues that will supplement the verbal information. In the current study, time was set aside following each interview to record information observed by the researcher including participants' presentation, non-verbal behavior, insight, comprehension and other relevant information pertinent to the study. The disadvantages of face-to-face interviewing may include the cost of travel and that some people may find the disclosure of personal information confrontational and embarrassing. In this study, all participants were asked the same questions in chronological order: *how the young person experienced their school work and the educational environment including any referrals for supplementary support; issues pertaining to family life and the home and surrounding environment; problems related to the onset of offending behaviour and/or peer involvement; and post-school experience.* To

maximise the study's validity when undertaking unstructured interviews, it is important to focus on the participants' views and opinions, not the researchers' views/opinions. Polgar and Thomas (2008, p. 109) argue that this can be achieved by the interviewers being 'sensitive, non-evaluative, alert and skilled at delivering and sequencing their questions'.

There are various means of recording interview information that include written summary notes, video recording and the audio taping of the live interview. As mentioned above, this study undertook audio recording of the interviews. The audio recording of interviews can maximise the study's validity. This is achieved when the 'interviewer's interpretation of the interviewee's answers is open to independent scrutiny ... by others' (Polgar & Thomas 2008, p. 109). Member checking, which involves agreement by researchers in relation to the codes and interpretations of the researchers, is one of the strategies recommended by Deborah Padgett to ensure rigour in qualitative research (Rubin 2014, p. 175). There are, however, several disadvantages that may occur when conducting audio tapes. For example, the intrusive nature of recording, the cost of post-interview analysis, and participant refusal. Focus groups with adult representatives from schools and youth services were conducted following the interviews to reinforce the findings.

## **Reimbursement**

The explanatory statement (see Appendix 6) informed the participants that they would be provided with a \$AUD 50.00 gift voucher at the completion of the interview, in appreciation for their time and contribution. There is considerable debate about the ethical implications of incentives. A study undertaken in Queensland involving 440 young people that explored the ethical implications of using incentives found that youth researchers can minimise the coercive influence by 'moderating and contextualising their use and by emphasising voluntary consent at all levels' (Seymour 2012, p. 51).

### **4.2.4 Recruitment process focus group**

The overall purpose of the research is to better understand the lived school experiences of 20 young males aged 16-21, and how those experiences may influence a trajectory into pro-criminal behaviour. A flyer was arranged and distributed to five local secondary schools and one primary school, one special school, two local youth services (including YSAS), Dandenong Police Station, and Dandenong Youth Justice (see Appendix 8). Representatives from these

areas were asked to display the flyer and discuss the contents with staff. At that stage, the researcher planned to have one focus group at YSAS in Dandenong. Despite follow up phone calls, there was no response from the police, primary and secondary schools, except for one secondary school. The principal of this school forwarded an email stating that, at this stage, he did 'not give permission for this to occur'. Four people agreed to be involved in the focus group. They included a representative from:

- The BEST Centre, Berry Street special school
- Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS)
- Dandenong Youth Justice, and
- Noble Park Youth Links

Topics explored in the focus group were drawn from the qualitative thematic analysis of the participant interview data. Focus group participants were invited to provide input into the meanings and interpretations of the themes emerging from the original data. It is argued that focus groups increase the accountability of services, promote consumer input into the research design, and augment the overall research findings (White 2002). The focus group interview takes a fundamentally different approach to an individual interview. Polgar and Thomas (2008, p.111) point out that 'the researcher is outnumbered, and the participants may interact with each other, modify each other's' responses and ask questions of each other.' The process may be challenging for the researcher because there is less control and new matters raised may be difficult to comprehend and respond to in the moment. Nevertheless, focus groups, in alignment with interviews, provide a rich and broad source of information and a significant contribution to knowledge. Focus groups are one independent method involving triangulation to develop the trustworthiness of qualitative data analysis (Polgar & Thomas 2008).

To elicit information from the focus group members, the process of the interview explored the themes identified within the general headings related to:

- how the young person experienced their school work and the educational environment, including any referrals for supplementary support;

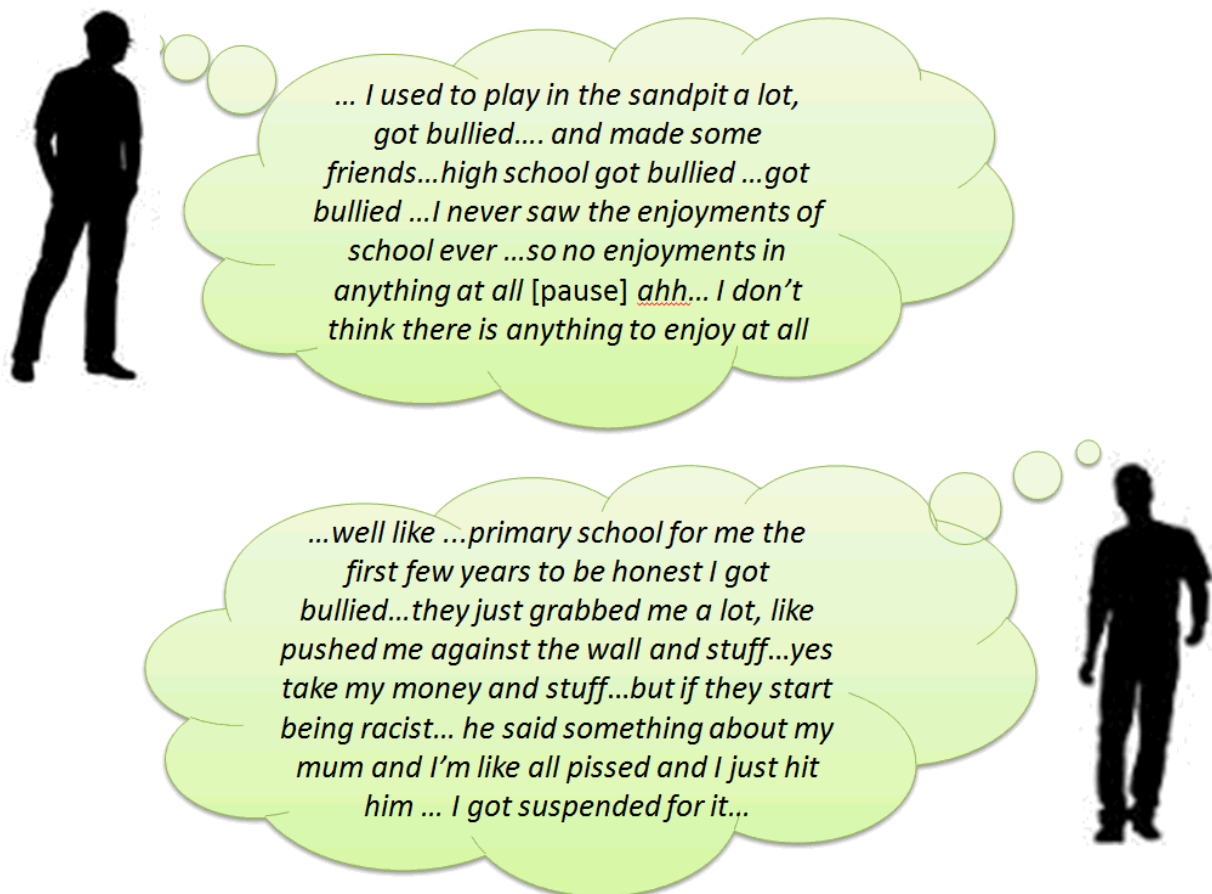
- issues pertaining to family life and the home and surrounding environment, and how this interacted with their schooling;
- issues pertaining to the onset of offending behaviour and/or peer involvement, including suspension or expulsion from school and their post-school experience;
- the young males' perception of what helped their situation and what did not help, what led them into involvement with the police and/or others in the justice system, and whether that was related to significant incidents in their life, such as family and/or peers, and did the school play a role in this predicament; and
- any services that helped or did not help their situation, and their perceptions in relation to what could have interrupted their life choices.

The researcher complied with the criteria pertaining to the Social Work Code of Ethics (5.5.2. Research). For instance, interviews with participants were performed within an anti-oppressive/anti-discriminatory, culturally sensitive framework (5.5.2.1).

The focus group was held on the 22 August 2016 from 4.30 – 5.30pm. An assistant provided support with refreshments and other small tasks. An agenda was handed out and ground rules discussed (see Appendix 7). Laminated copies of the themes related to the study's findings were placed on the walls. The process took the following steps, for example, in relation to 'bullying':

1. The researcher stated that - six participants reported incidents of being bullied both within and outside of the school grounds. At times the bullying was underpinned by racism. The experience would manifest in revenge and retribution.
2. The focus group members then read the comments from the young males.





3. The researcher asked the question (Q. 2). What is your experience of the level to which students are willing to share with teachers and workers their experiences of being bullied?
4. Audio taped discussion would follow. Enquiry as to whether the findings make sense, '...and if not, why not'? (Polgar & Thomas 2008, p.251). Additionally, what this could mean for policy and practice.

Nine questions in relation to the identified themes were asked. The researcher ensured that all focus group members were given the opportunity to express their thoughts.

As mentioned above, the plan was to conduct one focus group. As discussed in the findings chapter, one member had to leave the group early, this resulted in three focus group members remaining. It was agreed that a second focus group of three members would be helpful to

reinforce the findings; this was conducted in Geelong, a locality west of Melbourne. The Geelong focus group was held on the 11 October 2016. Three participants attended, two teachers from special schools and a drug and alcohol worker. The abovementioned process was replicated.

### **4.3 Paying attention to rigour and trustworthiness**

All research, regardless of the approach taken, is subject to rigour. This study used a qualitative research design to explore how young males' school experiences may have influenced a trajectory into pro-criminal behaviour. A limitation is that large sample sizes are not conducive to qualitative data. A limitation is that qualitative data typically has a small sample size therefore the findings need to be explored in terms of within method and between method triangulation. On the contrary, the strength of qualitative data is in the rich, firsthand information gleaned from the participants. Silverman (2013, p. 44) argues that '...methods only acquire meaning and validity by their embeddedness in particular theoretical perspectives'. Qualitative data gives insight into people's perspectives and experiences.

The unstructured and descriptive nature of qualitative research is often criticised by those researchers aligned with quantitative strategies primarily because of the opportunity for observer bias to misrepresent the data (Polgar & Thomas 2008). Additionally, the sampling processes undertaken in qualitative research may be acutely marked by the social phenomena studied. This point is particularly relevant regarding this study due to the data catchment area namely Dandenong, a locality considered highly multicultural. Polgar and Thomas (2008, p. 89) argue that '...what is true in one social setting may not be true in another [and that] cultures change with time'. To enhance the rigour of scientific enquiry and therefore the validity and reliability of qualitative research, Padgett (1998) details the following strategies to address the above concerns:

- Prolonged engagement
- Triangulation
- Peer debriefing and support
- Member checking

- Negative case analysis
- Auditing

This research project adopted several strategies with an emphasis on triangulation. Triangulation incorporates ‘multiple independent methods for collecting data’ (Polgar & Thomas, 2008, p. 251). The themes and subsequent interpretation of those themes are checked for consistency and matching. Triangulation was supported by the following process:

- The researcher drew on elements or steps from Colaizzi’s (1978) phenomenological descriptive methodology during the data analysis stage.
- The original focus group was changed to two mini focus groups (Dandenong and Geelong) when the youth justice member from the Dandenong focus group had to leave the group due to a crisis. The focus groups, with adult representatives from primary and secondary special schools and youth services, were conducted following the interviews to help develop trustworthiness.
- Data was cross checked on two occasions by fellow researchers at Higher Degree by Research (HDR) Conferences to ensure accuracy of the interpretations. Participant transcripts were provided to colleagues and coded into themes. The themes were then compared with the researcher’s identified themes.

#### **4.4 Data analysis overview and framework**

This exploratory study revealed a large amount of data with 20 interviews of young men recording 73,064 words and the focus groups recording 14,006 words. The voice recorded interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. Components or steps from Colaizzi’s (1978) phenomenological descriptive methodology (Englander 2012; Giorgi 2012; Shosha 2012) were used as a framework. Relevant themes were identified in the data.

This study adopted a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Glaser & Strauss 1967). The researcher was required to jointly collect, code and analyse data to develop theory as it transpired. Research that involves grounded theory has no prior hypothesis. The hypothesis is drawn from close data analysis, inductive theoretical analysis based on a study of cases (Silverman 2013, p.108). This study was concerned with exploring the participants’ inner world

and the kind of social world that they make happen in the discussion of school, offending behavior and relationships. The onus is on the researcher to work inductively, step back so that a closer look can occur (Silverman 2013).

It is argued that the analysis of qualitative data begins during the data collection stage. The analysis can be described as a progression in which interaction is occurring from the start at the data collection stage. This early data analysis is an advantage of qualitative research wherein the ‘data collection, analysis and writing are virtually inseparable...’ (Silverman 2013, p.15). While concurrent collection and analysis may occur, there is a clear distinction between the ‘during collection’ and ‘after collection’ stage. Patton (2002) discusses ‘beginning analysis’, whereby the questions have two purposes: to revise and shape subsequent data collection; and to inform the emerging thematic analysis. This process was used in the current study to explore the participant’s integral social relationships and draw on more in-depth information, to ‘get through and beyond conjecture and preconception to ...the underlying processes of what is going on’ (Glaser 1978). Interviews may commence with a broad question then narrow down to an area of interest or concern to the participant.

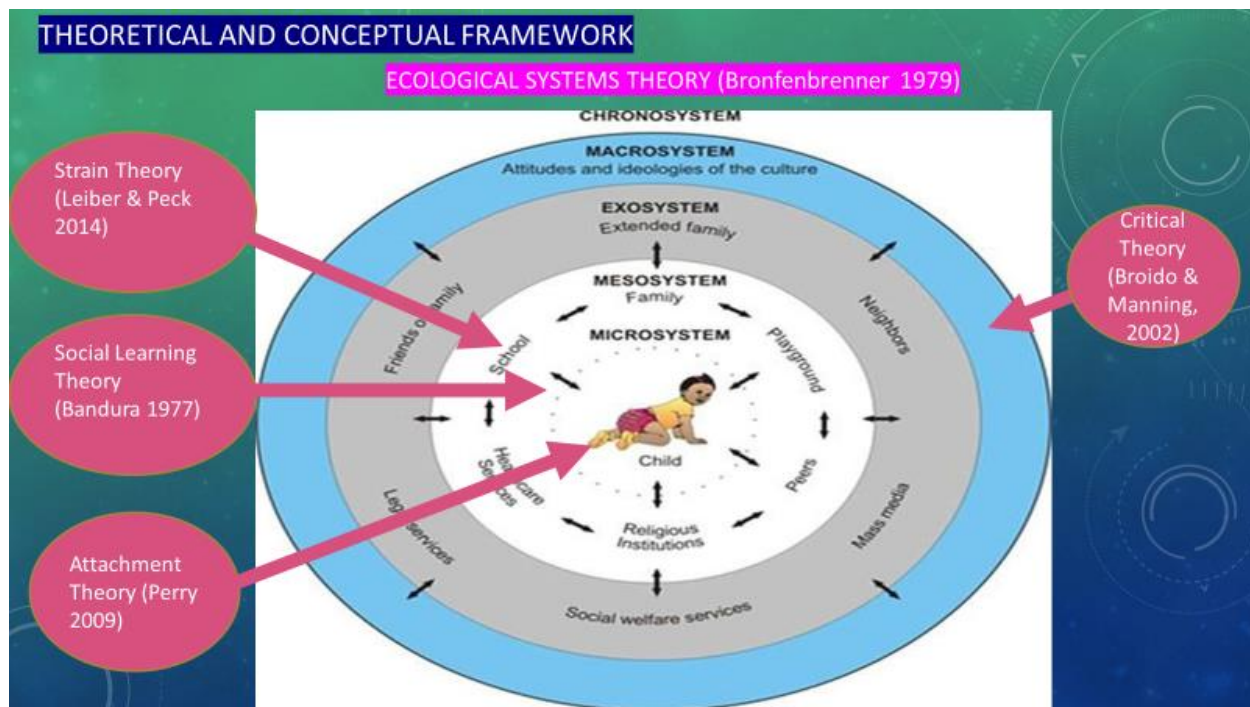
### **Processing the data**

Through use of data analysis, the researcher aims to ‘discover patterns among the data, patterns that point to theoretical understanding of social life’ (Rubin & Babbie 2008, p. 460). These patterns form major categories that are labelled, and the positions recorded in the transcript. Polgar and Thomas (2008, p. 113) suggest that ‘coding is an iterative process with the researcher coding and recoding, as the scheme develops’. To manage the extensive quantity of written text computer programs such as NVivo are employed to assist with the retrieval process of data. However, this method was not employed in this research project because the researcher was not familiar with NVivo and she wanted to identify the participants subtle nuances and body language signs. Once codes are developed analytical interpretation of the data is required. Researchers are called upon to think critically about the data, to interpret meanings in the context in which they appeared (Silverman 2013; Polgar & Thomas 2008). The marriage between what participants are relaying about their lives and the researcher’s own values and experiences is

embedded within qualitative studies. The reporting stage involves a thorough description of the categories with concurrent use of examples from the original transcripts.

During the coding process, the researcher adhered to Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological descriptive methodology as follows: each transcript was read and re-read to gain a general sense of the content; significant statements that pertained to the phenomenon were extracted; meanings were formulated from these statements; meanings were sorted into categories; and clusters of themes that included a cultural stream due to the varied ethnicity of the participant group were identified. Themes were recorded in an excel data base that coded to categories and subcategories under cultural background headings (African, Maori Pacific Islander, Australian, other), for example, under the category 'school experience' the subcategories among others were 'learning difficulties' and 'behavioural problems'. Repetitive themes were numbered and those with higher numbers resulted in a theme. In addition to this process in a word document, codes were allocated to each participant under categories, for example, the category of 'student/teacher relationships' Participant 1 theme was 'teacher supportive; Participant 2 theme was 'teacher yelled'. The above process made cross checking and location of themes easy to locate and streamlined the process. Structuring the themes is referred to by Neuman (2004) as axial coding.

The researcher had preconceived ideas around theoretical concepts, however, in line with grounded theory, and following close data analysis (Silverman 2013, p.108), at this stage of the project, ecological systems theory made sense as an umbrella in which other theories sat. The layers of ecological systems theory were particularly relevant to the young men's cultural background.



**Figure 3 - Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

## Chapter summary

Chapter Four has reported on the study's research methods, firstly by discussing the setting and demographic of Dandenong, a multicultural hub, that resulted in young male participants of a mixed cultural background recruitment. Initial discussions with YSAS were discussed along with an agreement for the research project to be undertaken. The data collection and process are outlined, includes the participant recruitment and procedure, data collection overview and methods. Additionally, the recruitment of the focus groups that resulted in attention to rigour and trustworthiness in conjunction with adoption of phenomenological descriptive model and data cross checking with peers. Data analysis were enhanced with the use of grounded theory to extract meaning from the data.

## CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS– PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

### FROM YOUNG MALE OFFENDERS’ PERSPECTIVES, HOW DO SCHOOL EXPERIENCES RELATE TO OFFENDING BEHAVIOUR?

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings of 20 participant interviews that were undertaken for the study and explores the question as to how school experiences relate to offending behaviour from the perspective of young male offenders. The chapter is divided into two parts, and each part is divided into sections.

Part 1 describes the outcome of the data analysis plan following the interviews and includes: the context of the sample, the age of the participants, family constellation, cultural background, and details relating to substance use, education, and offending behaviour. It also includes memoing conducted by the researcher at the end of each interview.

Part 2 describes the findings following the interview of 20 young males.

Part 3 describes the findings of the two focus groups.

PART 1: How the data analysis plan worked – constructing the cases.

*‘Data collection, analysis and writing are virtually inseparable in qualitative research - you can be pushed and pulled by various sources’*

(Silverman 2013, p. 15).

As discussed in Chapter 3, findings are drawn from qualitative data that emerged from the interviews with 20 participants and two focus group discussions with relevant stakeholders. Qualitative research is more likely to involve an ongoing and iterative (nonlinear) process.

The researcher had previously met with the participants prior to the interviews to invite them to participate in the study; she then read through the Explanatory Statement, gave a copy to the

participants and asked them to reflect on the contents with the support of a worker, if needed. An interview time was scheduled.

On the day of the interviews, participants were warmly welcomed to the room. They were reminded of the content of the Explanatory Statement and all agreed to sign the Consent Form. The Self-Report Participant Demographics Questionnaire was completed. Because these questions are easily answered, they can serve as a ‘warm-up’ to the questions that require more reflection (Polgar & Thomas, 2008, p.104). Participants were then interviewed with permission to use an audio tape.

Priori codes formed the basis for the interviews. These priori codes are summarised as follows:

- Experience of educational environment – *‘what was school like’; ‘did you enjoy school’; ‘were you connected to peers at school’; ‘what school difficulties did you experience’; ‘what helped’.*
- Home and surrounding environment – *‘what was home like’; ‘did you get support with your school work’; ‘what was the neighbourhood like’.*
- Onset offending behaviour – *‘type of behavioural problem’; ‘age onset’; ‘was there support/counselling’; ‘did you offend alone or with peers’; ‘describe the police, court system, youth justice system’.*
- Post school experience – *‘what happened when you left school’; ‘how did family members react’; ‘what educational programs, training programs or work options were available after leaving school’; ‘was there further involvement with police, court system or youth justice at that time’; ‘any recommendations’.*

Interviews were structured allowing time for memoing or inductive coding to occur at the end of each interview, at a time when the information was fresh. This took the form of a reflective note on how the young man presented and any key points.

Data from the interviews was then typed manually into a word document; participants had a number allocated to protect confidentiality. The transcripts were read carefully line by line and meaningful units relating to the research questions were segmented, copied and pasted into a second word document under the predetermined headings. For example – School experiences



(class room and school grounds): ‘...*I felt that embarrassed just ‘cause I didn’t know ...like shit about my homework...*’; and Family life and the home and surrounding environment: ‘... *he said something about my mum and I’m like all pissed and I just hit him...*’. Data was further arranged into a hierarchical structure with codes or subcategories allocated to a lower level. For example, under – School experiences (class room and school grounds): ‘... *can’t read properly, write properly...*’ is allocated to the subcategory of Learning difficulty.

The categories and subcategories were then arranged on an Excel spread sheet. Because of the high numbers of African and Maori Pacific Islander descent participants, codes were further subdivided into ethnicity. The process of enumeration quantified the data, for example, under Peer relationships, the highest reported comment was ‘negative peer relationships’(N=7). When you break this down further, three were African and four Maori Pacific Islander descent. Inductive analysis was used to describe the school experiences and how the experiences may lead to offending behaviour.

### **Participant interviews**

The participant interviews were conducted at the YSAS building in Dandenong, a location with which all participants were familiar because they were already clients of YSAS. The room offered privacy, confidentiality, and minimal distractions. Following each interview, the researcher wrote down her thoughts on how the participant presented and any key points. There was a wide variation in presentation that included: ‘strong body odour, anxious to start with, relaxed, friendly, easy going, quiet, nervous, limited insight/comprehension, closed re family, cautious, suspicious, articulate, insightful, ambivalent, flat affect, confident, agitated, and somewhat cynical’. Interviews spanned a period from April 2014 to January 2015. In total, 22 participants were interviewed, however, two participants were excluded from the study because they did not have justice involvement.

### **Self-report participant demographic**

Prior to the interview, participants were asked to respond to the questions emanating from the self-report Participant Demographic questionnaire as summarised in Appendix 9. The questionnaire detailed the participant’s age, ethnicity, family constellation, if the parents’ marital status were intact or separated, child protection and mental health involvement, the year of

leaving school, alcohol and/or illicit substance use including the onset of, and the age at, police involvement, and type of offences. Direct quotes are included in this section. Participants are labelled by case number in chronological order in which the interview took place.

### **Age, gender and ethnicity of participants**

Young male clients of YSAS, aged 16 – 21 years, with involvement in the justice system were invited to take part in the study. In total, 22 males were interviewed. Two participants were excluded from the study because they did not have criminal justice involvement. Table 2 below describes in detail participants' age and ethnicity.

<b>AGE</b>	<b>NUMBER</b>	<b>ETHNICITY</b>
<b>17</b>	1	<i>Asian</i>
	1	<i>Anglo Australian</i>
	1	<i>Maori Pacific Islander</i>
<b>18</b>	1	<i>Maori Pacific Islander</i>
	4	<i>African</i>
	1	<i>Anglo Australian</i>
<b>19</b>	2	<i>African</i>
	1	<i>Anglo Australian</i>
	1	<i>Indigenous Australian – Anglo Australian</i>
<b>20</b>	3	<i>Maori Pacific Islander</i>
<b>21</b>	1	<i>Anglo Australian</i>
	1	<i>African</i>
	2	<i>Maori Pacific Islander</i>

**Table 2 - Participant age and ethnicity**

The targeted age was 16-21 years, and while there was a relatively stable distribution across ages 17-21, there were no participants in the 16-year-old age bracket.

### **Family constellation**

Prior to the interview, information on the family structure, whether the parents were together or separated, if there was family support for the young person and if there was child protection and/or mental health involvement, was obtained with use of the Self-Report Participant Demographics Questionnaire and a Genogram. Table 3 below shows this distribution.

<b>ETHNICITY</b>	<b>NUMBER</b>	<b>PARENT'S INTACT</b>	<b>PARENT'S SEPARATED</b>	<b>FAMILY SUPPORT</b>	<b>DHS INVOLVEMENT</b>	<b>MH INVOLVEMENT</b>
<b>Maori Pacific Islander</b>	7	1	6	5 yes; 2 no	3 yes; 4 no	
<b>African</b>	7		7	5 yes; 2 no	1 yes; 6 no	
<b>Anglo Australian</b>	4		4	3 yes; 1 no	3 yes; 1 no	1 yes
<b>Indigenous Australian</b>	1		1	1 no	1 not sure	1 yes
<b>Asian</b>	1		1	1 no	1 not sure	

**Table 3 - Family constellation, ethnicity, support and DHS/MH involvement**

Only one of the 20 participant's parents were together. Thirteen participants reported that they could get support from family. Of these, three said they were generally supported, two felt supported by their mother, one had support from his father, four said that they were supported by extended family (aunts and uncles), one was supported by his sister, and one said he could get a 'bit' of support. Two participants stated that they could get support but chose not to. One said it

was ‘hard’ because his mother could not speak English and therefore ‘can’t understand’. Seven participants reported DHS involvement, three Maori Pacific Islander background (two in New Zealand), three Anglo-Australian background, and one African background. Two participants were not sure. Two participants reported mental health issues.

### **Ethnicity**

Specifically related to ethnicity, of the 20 young males interviewed, it was found that one participant identified as Indigenous/Anglo-Australian background. Four participants identified as Anglo-Australian background. Seven participants identified as African background. Of these, four were from Sudan, two from South Sudan, and one from Kenya. Seven participants identified as Maori Pacific Islander. Of these, six were of Maori descent and one Samoan Niuean descent; and one participant identified Asian background, namely Thailand. Table 4 below details the identified ethnic background of the participants.

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
<i>Indigenous Australian – Anglo Australian</i>	1
<i>Anglo Australian</i>	4
<i>African</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sudan (4)</i></li> <li>• <i>South Sudan (2)</i></li> <li>• <i>Kenya (1)</i></li> </ul>	7
<i>Maori Pacific Islander</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Maori (6)</i></li> <li>• <i>Samoan Niuean (1)</i></li> </ul>	7
<i>Asian</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Thailand</i></li> </ul>	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>

**Table 4 - Ethnic background of participants**

The sample shows strong representation of African and Maori Pacific Islander young males. Of the 20 participants, 14 originated from these regions.

### **School year completed and ethnic background**

Participants' stage of leaving school ranged from Year 7 to Year 12. One participant was still at school in Year 11. It is interesting to note that those young people who left school from Year 10 and below comprised six from Maori Pacific Islander descent, one Indigenous Australian, two Anglo Australian and one of African descent. Participants from Africa comprised six of the 10 young men who completed Year 11 and 12. See Table 5 below.

<b>ETHNICITY</b>	<b>NUMBER</b>	<b>YEAR COMPLETED</b>
<b>Maori Pacific Islander</b>	1	Year 7
<b>Maori Pacific Islander</b>	1	Year 8
<b>Indigenous Australian</b>	1	
<b>Maori Pacific Islander</b>	1	Year 9
<b>Australian</b>	1	
<b>Maori Pacific Islander</b>	3	Year 10
<b>Australian</b>	1	
<b>African</b>	1	
<b>Maori Pacific Islander</b>	1	Year 11
<b>African</b>	3	
<b>Australian</b>	1 + 1 currently at school	
<b>African</b>	3	Year 12
<b>Asian</b>	1	

**Table 5 - Ethnic background and school year completed**

## **PART 2: Findings from the participant interviews: FINDINGS/THEMES**

### **School experiences: (class room and school grounds)**

#### ***Participants' overall experience of school***

To elicit information about the participants' overall school experiences, questions were asked as follows:

‘Can you remember when you started school, what was it like for you?’

‘How much did you enjoy school?’

‘How connected did you feel to other young people?’

‘If you were having trouble at school, what would happen?’

‘Was there anything at school or within the school environment that helped your situation?’

There was a mixed response to the young men's experience of school. Most reported difficulties. For example: they noted learning problems (n=5), emotional dysregulation (anger) (n=4), victim of bullying (n=6), and externalised behavioural problems, such as, anger, bullying others, and fights (n=5). While there were common threads overall, three distinct subgroups emerged, as detailed below.

#### ***Commonalities that emerged within ethnic subgroups***

##### ***Subgroup 1: Maori Pacific Islander background***

The first subgroup comprised all participants from Maori Pacific Island background (N=6) who reported difficulties and a sequential pathway evolved. At the onset, feelings of embarrassment, due to difficulties comprehending and understanding the school work, resulted in low motivation, boredom, ambivalence, acting out and externalised behaviour:

*I felt that embarrassed just 'cause I didn't know ...like shit about my homework ...like I was embarrassed like a lot of people seeing ... my homework. So, it's not that I was just*

*being defiant and all that ...I guess some days I'd just chuck my homework on the fucking ground and just ...you know just go out with friends (P.4).*

*Can't read properly, write properly ...na [voice raised] I couldn't [do homework] that was the reason why ...I didn't understand any of the things they were asking me... (P.2).*

*Um [pause] no like...na like I never used to do my work when I was at school...I hated just sitting there all quiet (P.1).*

*I didn't really understand the work like other people could get it, but I couldn't get it ...secondary (school)...oh man that was worse [laugh].... yeah...it was worse...I didn't ...I couldn't understand the work ...but I tried but I just ...yeah...I didn't get it.... Um ...I dunno I think I [was] just too shy (P.20).*

*I hated it [school], I didn't know English when I came here... I didn't know how to speak English when I went to primary school, so everyone looked at me like I was weird... (P21).*

*Just fights...fights all the time, getting suspended ...stupid stuff like smoking ...and then we used to crack the shits 'cause we'd get in trouble for that so we'd just ...I dunno just give up [laugh] (P22).*

With this subgroup, a trajectory from difficulties with school work, to association with a negative peer culture, illicit substance use and criminal behaviour started to evolve:

*I hated just sitting there all quiet..... hanging around with a bunch of boys ...met all the boys...oh not really at the school ...but I met them on the street ...and started being a bully and all that.... hang around ...probably sell gear...sell stuff like cigarettes at school ... (P.2).*

*I just wanted to get the fuck out of there [school] and go get pissed or fucken go smash someone ...or go fucken take all their money ...fucken go do shit ...more shit...an... fucken steal some cars and go for a drive and fuck go do some more crime and stuff... (P.4).*

*I wagged school... I didn't really care about school to be honest... (P.20).*

*I'd crack it, I would go off tap and then I would probably do my own thing ...walk off ...do anything ...do... 'cause I was so angry at everybody for nothing... (P.21).*

Nevertheless, participants from Maori Pacific Islander background could identify what they liked about their school experiences in the following comments:

*Physical stuff ...you don't have to be really brainy to play sports...anything that anyone was playing at school ...basketball and golf ...handball...fuck two square. Everything, stuff like ...rugby...cooking 'cause like ...home ed' ... I just like eating, that's all... (P.4).*

*I never really liked maths, but he was a good teacher, so I used to do all my maths work and English too... (P.1).*

*[in primary school] I had a lot of support... [in secondary school] I'd rather be in the music program (P.2).*

*I like contact sports, like I wasn't really into footy [laugh]... I liked woodwork... 'cause I could use my hands and make stuff... ' (P.20).*

*Yeah just drawing ...sports ...I usually like rugby, basketball, anything. I'm right into cricket, golf... athletics ...anything ...just to run... (P.21).*

### ***Subgroup 2: African and Asian background***

The second subgroup comprised all the young males of African descent (N=7) and the one young male from Thai descent who found school predominately a positive experience. The experience however for five participants was tempered by racism and bullying either directed towards themselves or peers. Adjustment to primary school was a difficult stage for some of these young males. Nevertheless, once settled, the transition to secondary school brought change and optimism:

*When I first started at high school it was all good, everything was good .... oh ...well I got into fights...yeah if someone called me names then I'd fight ... the teachers were all good yeah... (P.5).*



*I did enjoy school but ...the bullying part when some students had to go bully other students for no reason ... I actually liked the religion class 'cause it was fun ...the teacher...she made it fun every um...every 2<sup>nd</sup> week we would always watch a movie.... (P.6).*

*Primary school for me the first few years to be honest I got bullied... secondary school got better for me... and like the teachers were all right in that school...they helped me out a lot ... (P.8).*

*Um...it was alright, I kind of liked it, the experiences and stuff like that ...yeah... I was mostly interested in history ...war history... (P.9).*

*The experience was different... I was in the basketball team, football team, soccer team at primary school...like didn't take it that seriously. When you move from primary school to high school you get nervous, you don't know what type of groups you are going to hang out with, you don't know if you are going to have all the confidence you did as you were like in primary school....it always is but once you get used to it... high school is pretty fun (P.11).*

*Ah ...for me it was hard at the start 'cause where I am from is all Asian community.... I was only.... African kid there, so it was like more racial...at the start for the first year and a half it was all racial comments. High school for me, it was great, I enjoyed high school... 'cause I'm very good at sports. I even played AFL for the school (P.12).*

*It was fun...but the most I enjoyed was primary school ... racist comments...yeah...all the time... (P.13).*

*It was great like ...it was awesome ...life was good ...everything ... until you hit Year 10...everything changes you know ... and it was easy to make bad friends... (P.14).*

### ***Subgroup 3: Anglo-Australian background***

The third subgroup comprised those participants from Anglo-Australian background. Of this group, all four reported that their parents had separated when they were young. Three families

were involved with child protection services, and three participants experienced transience and disruption in their schooling:

*Primary school was alright, I moved around to a few different primary schools...I was moving schools consistently... I showed up a total of three days in the whole term (P.19).*

*It wasn't too bad until I left the first school .... I got moved interstate, so I was moving from my friends and family to interstate to a place I don't even know... (P.18).*

*My parents realised what was going on. I couldn't go good [with schoolwork] in Victoria. They moved me up to Brisbane for 2 ½ years ... [when he caught up with his school work] they moved me back down ... I got good at everything (P. 10).*

As discussed above, the findings indicated common experiences that appeared to be related to ethnicity.

### ***Learning and/or language difficulties***

Five young men experienced language and/or learning difficulties. This in turn led to feelings of isolation, sadness and despondency and, from peers', racism and bullying:

*It was a bit hard [starting school], I had a bit of a speech problem .... mainly between grade Prep and 2... I moved three times 'cause of my speech problem ...a lot of kids used to try and pick on me [when asked what he liked/did not like about school he replied] ...sometimes I would ask them [teachers] if I did not understand what they were talking about when they explained on the board... I would ask them again to explain it to me and they said 'no, they have already explained it on the board (P.10).*

*I had a psychological test done that revealed that I had a learning difficulty.... low cognitive ability, short term memory loss... [when asked if he received any support he replied] ...no support ... unless the support they were giving me was so subtle I didn't realise... (P.15).*

*Getting in trouble 'cause I wasn't any good at maths ...um it was just a bunch of things (P.18).*

*I used to play in the sandpit a lot, got bullied.... and made some friends...high school got bullied ...got bullied ...I never saw the enjoyments of school ever ...so no enjoyments in anything at all [pause] ahh... I don't think there is anything to enjoy at all... (P.16).*

One young man reported that he enjoyed primary school but found the transition to secondary school arduous due to difficulties with his school work. He was eventually transferred to a special school:

*[School was] ... normal but it was kind of hard...you know [the work] ...it was confusing... ' (P.13).*

While many young men experienced being teased and bullied due to learning and/or language difficulties, for others racism hampered their sense of belonging and fitting into a learning environment.

### ***The experience of being bullied***

Six participants reported incidents of being bullied both within and outside of the school grounds. At times racism underpinned the bullying. As shown in the below comments, the experience would manifest in revenge and retribution.

One young man found the experience of being bullied throughout his school years particularly difficult. During the interview his pattern of speech was at times illogical; it is likely that he internalised his feelings to the point of being desensitised:

*Yep I chose not to [make friends] ... I didn't want to ...I don't want the social side ...I check out ...the social side by bullies ... I'll tell you an occurrence .... I was in the sand pit at primary school ...Year 6 came ...a Year 6 grader comes and puts my face in the sand and makes me eat it... in high school I got clothes lined...they passed me a ball ...they blind eyed me ...so I had to hit him.....and then the fight started and he won [The young man found it difficult to ask for support] '...when I got bullied the teachers weren't around and I just left it as that, no point complaining, they were just checking me out... I didn't even tell my mum (P.16).*

Eventually he did find connection and belonging with a peer group, and with the group transitioned into crime. This aspect will be discussed later in the chapter. The young man inferred that he is now alert to others being bullied:

*I'll sleep at a park with the boys ...we travel light ...5 or 4 ...4 or 5...can get drunk, stand on your own two feet... but you want to bully me now I'm almost 18 ...I'm almost a young man ...you want to bully a young man now ...you can bully a kid ...yeah...bully me... (P.16).*

Various aspects of bullying occurred including overt in the form of physical assault. This young man experienced racist verbal and physical abuse:

*Well like ...primary school for me the first few years to be honest I got bullied...they just grabbed me a lot, like pushed me against the wall and stuff... yes take my money and stuff...but if they start being racist.... or start like pushing me around and stuff then like...in my head ...I just want to get them ...*

I asked if he had spoken to the teachers:

*Yeah...I spoke to them, they told them off but like it's got to stop and stuff but I'm not the kind of one who keeps dobbing in ...like keep telling the teachers stuff... (P.8).*

He reported that when his older brothers spoke to them the bullying stopped.

The theme of anger and retribution because of the bullying was common:

*A lot of kids used to try and pick on me and I'd end up ...when they went to fight me I'd end up bashing them ... (P.10).*

*Like if you want to play like that. ...I can play like that... (P. 8).*

One participant identified a strategy to deal with the problem of bullying, although he concluded that the approach did not manage a more recent phenomenon of abuse channeled via social media:

*At my high school they introduced this thing called the 'bully button'. If you were being bullied, you pressed the button ... start recording ... was a great way to stop punch-ons*

*and fights ...but it doesn't really help with the sort of verbal abuse that you get ... especially in this day and age ...the way it is with social media and my generation (P.15).*

More subtle types of bullying also occurred. One young man felt pressure and embarrassment from peers when asked to comply with the teacher's request:

*You come late ...you can do your detention at lunch time or after school ...you can choose it at lunch time or in the ground pick up rubbish...but I didn't really want to do that 'cause all the other students would be laughing at me and that... (P.11).*

### ***Racism***

While the data showed that bullying stood alone as a separate phenomenon as identified above, at times it was also enmeshed with racism. The cyclical nature of racism was evident for one young man who experienced racist comments from an ethnic group relatively new to the country. He commented:

*Ah ...for me it [primary school] was hard at the start 'cause where I am from is all Asian community ...I was only like ...African kid there, so it was like more racial ...at the start for the first year and a half it was all racial comments... (P.12).*

Another young man also mentioned that primary school was where he first experienced bullying and racism:

*Well like ...primary school for me the first few years to be honest I got bullied...they just grabbed me a lot, like pushed me against the wall and stuff...yes take my money and stuff...but if they start being racist... he said something about my mum and I'm like all pissed and I just hit him ... I got suspended for it... (P.8).*

In this situation, the racism was not only directed to the individual but also a family member which brought an angry response from the victim.

### ***Externalised behavioural problems in the school environment***

Anger and/or behavioural problems in the school setting, at times underpinned by embarrassment, were identified by eight participants involved in the study. The problem behaviour would present in various forms, such as anger, bullying others and fights. The

following young man acknowledged that the antecedent to his externalised behaviour was feeling embarrassed:

*I felt that embarrassed just 'cause I didn't know ...like shit about my homework ... so it's not that I was just being defiant and all that ...you know ...just...I guess some days I'd just chuck my homework on the fucking ground and just ...you know just go out with friends... (P.4).*

The problems associated with the transition to a new country and a new language again led to internalised feelings and subsequent maladaptive coping strategies:

*I hated it [school], I didn't know English when I came here... I didn't know how to speak English when I went to primary school, so everyone looked at me like I was weird. Throughout primary school it was pretty hard, there would just be bullies everywhere...but then I grew up a bully...I was really pretty much class clown...I'd crack it, I would go off tap and then I would probably do my own thing ...walk off ...do anything ...do... 'cause I was so angry at everybody for nothing... (P.21).*

One young man experienced behavioural problems from a young age, and despite coping academically, he was eventually asked to leave school:

*I was acting up being a little rascal, got into trouble and just remember hating it sooo much ...sort of I guess feeling out of place... sitting in the classroom would bore me...they asked me to leave because regardless...that I'd met all their expectations academically I was too much of a disruption in class ...um...lowering the grades of other students apparently... (P.15).*

School policy that allowed students to have 'time out' was a positive strategy:

*I had a lot of workers back then too, I was um running amuck.... yeah had cops come once or twice ...getting suspended a lot ...they give me a red card [teacher said] go outside go for a walk and come back like after you calmed down. But I never used to do that, I just walk out .... I need to be by myself like I need ...yeah ...no one around me I need to focus on myself (P.17).*

Behavioural problems at school often resulted in truancy, suspensions and expulsions.

One young man expressed frustration and anger at a system in which he felt disconnected:

*I just wanted to get the fuck out of there and go get pissed or fucken go smash someone ...or go fucken take all their money ...fucken go do shit ...more shit...an...fucken steal some cars and go for a drive and fuck go do some more crime and stuff (P.4).*

This disconnection and inability to engage with learning led to conduct problems, truancy, suspensions and expulsions:

*Fucking smoking ...and I was smoking inside the school grounds...not doing my homework, not coming to class on time ...wagging ...for months...I was like suspended all the time, I had detention like every day...(P.4).*

A combination of psychosocial factors influenced some young men to sustain schooling:

*Like at the mainstream school I'd be getting in trouble for wagging, truanting, getting in trouble for smoking in the school grounds...being disruptive in classes...fighting in school...fighting out of school, getting in trouble 'cause my behaviour, my language, getting in trouble 'cause I wasn't any good at maths ...um it was just a bunch of things... (P.18).*

*We were like the trouble makers in the school ... from grade three ...we burnt down the back of the school ...yeah had cops come once or twice [in high school] ...getting suspended a lot (P.17).*

*It [school] was pretty hard, 'cause I didn't know much... I didn't really understand the work like other people could get it, but I couldn't get it ...secondary...oh man that was worse [laugh]...I wagged school...I didn't really care about school to be honest (P.20).*

### **Further emergent themes**

A sprinkling of other themes sat beneath the primary category related to school experience.

One young male believed that school should be meaningful, that is, be linked to and relate to future aspirations:

*If I think it's not going to help me do what I want to do in the future, then I won't like it...  
I would muck around then... (P.1).*

One young man made meaning by setting up his own business at school:

*Hang around ...probably sell gear...sell stuff like cigarettes at school... (P.2).*

In examining the participants' specific school experiences (class room and school grounds), their comments reflect difficulties, most from a young age. The findings revealed several commonalities and patterns of behaviour aligned with their ethnicity: Maori Pacific Islander, African, and Anglo-Australian background. Learning and/or language difficulties resulted in isolation, sadness and despondency that was in turn exacerbated by being bullied and racism. In some cases, the victims retaliated. For those young men who found school an overall negative experience, externalised behaviour in the form of anger, bullying others and fights, resulted in suspensions, and in some cases expulsion.

Nevertheless, some young men identified positive school experiences. The following young man from Africa enjoyed history:

*Um...it was alright, I kind of liked it, the experiences and stuff like that ...mostly [war] history... (P.9).*

Two young men found the early years of school a positive experience:

*[primary school] it was fun... (P. 13).*

*It [school] was great like ...it was awesome ...life was good ...everything...until you hit Y10...everything changes you know... (P.14).*

Peer relationships enhanced the school experience for the following participant;

*[Enjoyed]... being on lunch break and recess, hanging out with mates... (P.15).*

While the above participant found the relationship with peers a positive experience, for others the connection with peers and/or the teaching staff brought mixed results.



### **Student teacher relationships**

The student teacher relationships mirrored the young males' overall experience of school, with seven participants reporting a positive, supportive relationship with several teachers (it should be noted that six of the seven participants were of African background). Six participants reported both supportive and unsupportive teachers; two participants reported support from individual teachers (including one cultural teacher); and five participants felt generally unsupported.

#### ***Teachers were supportive***

The students welcomed a positive relationship in which the teacher offered support during school hours, and an understanding of cultural and familial difficulties, including after school and one-to-one support. The data shows the support was characteristically or typically specific to individual teachers. This support in which trust developed was expressed in the following comments:

*The teachers were all good yeah... if I want help from the teacher I'd ask... (P.5).*

*Yep ...I felt supported by the coordinator and my home group teacher...I trust my home room teacher... (P.6).*

*It was ok ...I had a good relationship teacher, friends...yeah...sometimes I had to stay back after school, talk to the teachers to get a little more help ...there was a few teachers that tried to help me out, so I chatted, 'what's going on in your life? What's going on at home?' The coordinator, she was always very helpful, she was from Madagascar... near Africa, so she knew a little bit about what was going on. Being the teacher of course ...she usually actually helped me ...she'd always tell me to pull my head in. Yeah, there is a group of people that help you out to set up a path plan so there is a future for you after school... (P.11).*

*My teacher and she started...she did a one-on-one session with me and she only gave me like so much of the homework (P.4).*

Specialist services located within the school sector such as welfare services that could make assessments, deliver treatment and referrals and extracurricular activities were also acknowledged as beneficial:

*Yeah...oh...there was this lady ...it was a welfare officer ...she was like the only one that could understand where I was coming from, so instead of me when I get angry...she told me to come to her ...she would calm me down, just talk to me...yeah, she would just talk to me...just think about positive stuff ..not negative...yeah...she took like ..she even like got me into an anger management programs... (P.12).*

*My music teacher was mad. My dance teacher was alright but sometimes she comes to class angry... she was cool, she could dance... (P.14).*

*But I actually liked the religion class 'cause it was fun ...the teacher...it was her...she made it fun every um...every second week we would always watch a movie...'. (P.6).*

As expressed in the comments above, support and encouragement during school years, can have a positive influence in relation to the young person's future pathways.

***Some teachers were supportive, others not supportive***

For those young males who found some teachers supportive and others unsupportive, the qualities and attributes of the teachers that enhanced the student/teacher relationship included: a perceived friendship, the teacher's relaxed persona, and humour. One young male articulated this belief:

*The teachers used to be like my friend ...like they would come in and have a laugh (P.1).*

Another participant echoed the above comments:

*They like give me a chance to speak ..and show my side of the story ...the ones I liked used to like joke around... he was more like a laughing guy ...he was also a drama teacher so he liked to make jokes and stuff... like he was more easy going ...like more nicer when he explained things ...he wouldn't mind explaining it better if you didn't understand properly...and um...yeah he would just talk like a normal person and not like a teacher ... (P10).*

These comments demonstrate that the young person felt validated, understood and 'normal'.

Advice and encouragement was welcomed by the young males and with that came confidence:

*Yeah...some teachers were alright [teacher gave] confidence... like for example... I would do my work and they'd go 'good try...good try' but the other teachers ...no... they would tell me to do it you know... do it again... (P.2).*

*It was only the teachers that showed me like ...like that gave me advice and helped me ...you know calm me down or take me out of the room if I'm feeling ...like if we were in a class then I could go up to the teachers that I really got along with and we'd just talk or do activities just to calm and talk about ...stuff like that (P.17).*

While 11 of the 20 participants reported that one or a number of teachers were supportive, for others the student teacher relationship was problematic.

### ***Teachers were unsupportive***

While the above pro-social teacher qualities were seen to enhance the student/teacher relationship, judgmental comments triggered anger for one young male:

*There are some smartarse ones you know [triggered anger] .... the way they talk usually... (P.13).*

Another participant reported that the only support he received was from a teacher aid:

*Teacher aids or something...that was pretty much the only help... (P.20).*

A belief that they were being victimised, judged and dismissed, tinged student/teacher relationships. One young male appeared to internalise his feelings:

*When I got bullied the teachers weren't around and I just left it as that, no point complaining... (P.16).*

This belief of being singled out and/or judged is further reflected in the following comments:

*Yeah...I just didn't like the way they forced rules on me ...but then they let [other] people go for free ...go free with all sorts of stuff ...yeah (P.21).*

*She would pick on me a lot ...and it actually, I know teachers aren't supposed to do things like that ...but it seriously felt like it (P.15).*

One young male reported that negative comments about his mother from the school principal resulted in him retaliating:

*The principal called me into the office and she started saying to me that my mum didn't raise me right ...she was being judgmental about my family and stuff so I didn't like what she was saying ...and then 'cause I didn't like what she was saying I raised my voice so she locked me into her office ...like she locked the door to her office ...and then I started telling her that this is entrapment and stuff like that ...she's not allowed to lock me into a room that I don't want to be in and all that kind of stuff ...she just kept going on about what my mum did ... disrespecting my family so I told her she's got 30 seconds to let me out otherwise I'd make my own way out ...she didn't open the door so I threw a chair through a window ...and they couldn't technically expel me 'cause I lived like a block away ...I was in their area code...(P.18).*

The findings demonstrate that there was a mixed response to the participants' relationship with teachers and school staff. For some the experience was positive while others experienced frustration, despair, perceived unfairness, and an overall disconnectedness in student/teacher relationships. The need to develop a sense of belonging drew these young males to a negative peer group association, and in some instances, pro-criminal activities. This is discussed in the next section.

### **Peer relationships**

Peers were a strong influence on school attitudes and behaviours. Typically, peer relationships were negative with only two participants reporting a positive association. Enmeshed within and underpinning, a negative peer culture was bullying, conflict, fights and alcohol and/or illicit substance use. Nevertheless, the membership with the peer group provided status, a sense of identity and, additionally, a pathway into crime.

### ***Negative peer influence***

A negative peer group provided status and a sense of identity for seven participants. This sense of belonging is expressed in the following comments:

*I met two of the boys from school ...you know...and then I went out with them and on that night, I'd see what they got up to ...it was like ...fucking ...I just wanted to do what they were up to...I just wanted to kick back with them ...just do crime you know... (P.4).*

*I think I had a poor choice of friends.... yeah, I was always hanging out with the trouble makers... (P.20).*

Making friends did not appear to be a problem, it was the type of friend that was the issue:

*Connected ...easy going...at school it was easy to make friends... and it was easy to make bad friends to...a lot of Aussies... (P. 14).*

The connectedness however was not always cordial and was underpinned by perceptions and beliefs of being singled out by peers. This resulted in conflict and bullying.

### ***Bullying, conflict/fights within the peer group***

Four participants reported conflict within the peer group in which the precursor was bullying and subsequent retaliation. This social phenomenon was outlined as follows:

*Not everyone ...but ...just people that would look at me funny... (P.2).*

There was anger and revenge:

*Or start like pushing me around and stuff then like...in my head ...I just want to get them ...like if you want to play like that ...I can play like that... (P.8).*

Overt, aggressive bullying, racial intolerance and payback was also a theme:

*In high school I got clothes lined...they passed me a ball ...they blind-eyed me [hit in the eyes with the ball] ... so I had to hit him...and then the fight started, and he won... (P.16).*

*The first few years to be honest I got bullied...they just grabbed me a lot, like pushed me against the wall and stuff... yes take my money and stuff ... but if they start being racist... (P.8).*

When other students teased him because of his disability, the next young person responded aggressively:

*If someone ...if someone said something to me about how I spoke 'you retard' or 'talk properly' or 'dumb arse' or something like that ...or ...yeah... (P.10).*

Others reported their own experiences of being teased and bullied:

*If you come late you can do your detention at lunch time or after school ...but I didn't really want to do that because all the other students would be laughing at me and that (P.11).*

*'Cause I used to get teased a lot...constantly. So, it did make me feel as if I wasn't a part of the group...and um...they'd call me 'gay...faggot'... (P.15).*

*I didn't want to [make friends] ...I don't want the social side ...I check out ...the social side by bullies...' (P.16).*

For another young man kinships underpinned conflict:

*There were these four brothers...I used to get into fights with them daily, four of them and one of me or me and my brother... (P.18).*

Another variable that cemented peer relationships involved the use of alcohol and/or illicit substances.

### ***Alcohol and/or illicit substance use***

The use of alcohol and /or illicit substance was recognised as a primary theme in the overall data with all 20 participants disclosing this (see below); within a peer context, only two participants noted this. When asked if friends were involved in illicit substance use the following participant stated:

*Some of them were... (P.13).*

The next participant who left school after Year 8, the 9<sup>th</sup> year of school in Victoria, Australia, found the lifestyle on the streets with peers amenable and without structure:

*Don't have to wake up in the mornings, I could drink ...crash at some of my mate's house...wake up in the morning ...don't have to go to school ...drink again ...smoke*

*weed....we knew them from a tag ...jus weed, alcohol, chroming, smoking, drugs, drugs, I didn't smoke dope ... methamphetamines ... didn't know it until probably about 17...16 ...*  
(P. 2).

The data shows that, while the relationship with peers proved tenuous and underpinned by pro-criminal attitudes and behaviour, status and identity cemented and maintained the connection. Only two participants reported a pro-social, positive relationship with peers.

### ***Positive peer relationships***

Those participants who reported a positive connection with peers portray a belief in themselves and a sense of confidence. The two continued at school until Years 11 and 12. They believed that mutual support underpinned the relationship:

*We supported each other with everything...I used to help the primary school kids... (P.6).*

*Yeah...I'm good with people...my mates...my friends would tell me to cool down... (P.13).*

While the data demonstrates a strong peer association that was primarily associated with identity and status, overall the relationships had a negative slant; the connection was enmeshed within a framework of limited trust and pro-criminal attitudes and behaviors.

### **Alcohol and/or illicit substance use**

All 20 participants reported alcohol and/or illicit substance use. Fourteen participants reported a combination of alcohol and cannabis; three cited only cannabis; one cited only alcohol; two reported methamphetamine (ICE) use along with other substances; one reported the use of hallucinogenic and cannabis; and one reported using heroin. The youngest participant was eight years of age when he commenced cannabis use and the oldest was 17 years of age. Two participants reported alcohol use from the age of 11 and seven from the ages of 12 and 13 years old.

Alcohol and /or illicit substance use occurred both within and outside of the school environment:

*Fucking smoking ...and I was smoking inside the school grounds...not doing my homework, not coming to class on time ...wagging ...for months... (P.4).*

*I'll sleep at a park with the boys...we travel light ...5 or 4 ...4 or 5...can get drunk, stand on your own two feet... (P.16).*

Early school departure and limited structure in activities was a risk factor to alcohol and/or illicit substance use. The following participant who left school at 14 years of age details his laissez-faire lifestyle:

*Stay at home...go out ...stay on the streets ...go out ...smoke weed, do drinks ...other drugs that I used to do back then (P.17).*

The next participant reported that he traversed between criminal activity and school attendance. He broke into houses to obtain money for cannabis:

*I used to spend it on like [cannabis]... 'cause I used to smoke heaps of weed then (P.1).*

Loss / grief and emotional dysregulation were also precursors to alcohol use. One participant reported the death of four friends, one who was stabbed:

*Oh...one of my friends passed away...yeah ...and then I started drinking heaps and got in mostly trouble with the police... (P.5).*

Others describe a combination of anger and sadness:

*Yeah, I was a very angry child ...still am ...[chuckle]...school was boring... ' (P.11).*

*Like sometimes I come angry ...sad...sometimes I had to go drink and then go to school and just get pissed off 'cause of the students ... I was suspended for two weeks... (P.6).*

Family members influenced choices and decisions around alcohol and illicit substance use. This young man's cousin introduced him to cannabis, alcohol and a negative peer group shortly after he arrived in Australia:

*Yeah, the other one just told me to smoke a ciggy, drink alcohol...like Jim Bean and stuff... that was what good about it [peer group] ...I found it was good ...I had my first drink, my first cigarette... (P.14).*



A degree of insight is evident in the comments of the following participant who was ‘on the outer’ until drug involvement enhanced his status. He was, however, aware that he was being used:

*They knew that I was a smoker and that I’d smoked dope... of course once they knew, I had hook ups and everything ... I know that they are just using me...[laugh] (P.15).*

The data indicates that alcohol and/or illicit substance use is clear as a trend, that for many young males the use commenced at a young age, and within various contexts. Cannabis and alcohol were the preferred substance. The theme covers several domains, both within and outside of the school environment, and additionally, as seen in the next section within a family context.

### **Family life and the home and surrounding environment**

To gain an understanding of what family life and the home and surrounding environment was like for the young men participating in the study, the following questions were explored.

‘Can you tell me something about what it was like at home?’

‘If you were having trouble at school, how did you cope with that?’

‘What was it like living in your neighbourhood?’

As mentioned above in the demographics’ section, only one of the 20 participants’ parents were together. Nevertheless, 13 participants reported that they could get support from family. Thematic analysis revealed three overriding themes. The predominant theme was ‘conflict in the family home’ as reported by 10 of the 20 participants. Five participants reported family violence, and five participants reported alcohol and drug use.

Many other factors emerged from the data analysis as influential to the family and environment context. Data analysis revealed an overall substantial negative pattern.

### ***Conflict in the family home***

As mentioned above, 10 young males reported conflict in the family home. For a number of participants, the refugee experience and the resultant fractured nature of these families is demonstrated in the findings. One young male stated that prior to his father returning to Africa:

*Oh, they had been fighting a lot... (P.5).*

Another participant lived with his grandmother until aged 17 when his family arrived in Australia:

*When my family came it was fucked up...my mum came with this anger telling my grandma that she doesn't give a shit about me, and my grandma just took that ...*

This young man's father had died and there was a degree of sadness in his presentation when he added further:

*Yeah...yeah, she [grandmother] is like a friend to me... (P.14).*

### ***DHHS involvement***

Eight participants reported DHHS involvement. Protracted ongoing conflict between parents is described in the following comments. In this case, the young man believed he was 'caught in the middle':

*My dad would be telling me something about my mum ...how stupid and dumb she is. So I'd tell mum that and then she'd tell me to tell dad this and .....we went for this interview and um my dad was there and he was just yelling at the school ..oh yeah if you'd come live with me this wouldn't have happened, and it's all his mother's fault and she doesn't try and bring him up academically ...and all the teachers who were in the interview and even myself were all sitting there telling my dad this isn't about mum this isn't about where I'm living, this is about me, what I have done and what is going on in my life, but he doesn't understand that for some reason... (P.15).*

Another participant described the situation at home as 'simple' or 'mayhem' in which he transitioned between both parents. However, he spent many years in residential care as mandated by DHHS:

*Life at home could either be simple or it could be just mayhem...um...more or less most of the time 'cause of my stepfather he would come home like late or he would come home drunk or he would come home in a foul mood or something like that to set me off or set the whole family off and then everything would just go pear shape... (P.18).*

The young Indigenous participant, who reported a history of mental health and behavioural problems with resultant criminal activity, appeared confused about how to access services. He commented that he was angry with his mother. The young man believed that his mother was not there for him (it is possible that his mother was not coping). There was ongoing conflict between the participant and his mother resulting in intervention orders. He commented:

*I'm asking for some food or a place to stay where I live ...you got to go to world war three with me before I fucken...you know ...you're a mum ... It's like I don't give a fuck any more 'cause you've [mother] disowned me for a while and you keep playing like I'm bad ...your telling your friends all this shit you know ...they don't really know my side of the story, only yours...I just don't know what to do... (P.17).*

One young man, whose father was deported from Australia due to criminal charges, found it difficult to articulate his experience of leaving home at a young age, developing a bond with the 'boys', and disconnecting from school in Year 8. He commented:

*I wasn't basically home...I was basically at the station...yeah, I was homeless ... homeless, but not kicked out...ran away for about a month ...then a year and a half...I was 13...12...yeah...just me and all the boys... (P.2).*

While conflict and disorganisation within the family system was a strong theme that emerged from the data, the more pressing concern of family violence was also evident.

### ***Family violence***

Five participants reported entrenched family violence at home. Underpinning the violence was alcohol abuse, and parental maladaptive coping strategies in response to educational issues. A concerning trend was the perpetuation and cyclical nature of the violence.

One young man who experienced language and learning difficulties commented:

*Oh ...trouble with my step-father ... like sometimes he just yells at me for no reason ...or he'd hit me by using objects... (P. 8).*

Another presented as somewhat cynical of the Australian welfare system because he was excluded from entitlements. He also appeared to normalise the autocratic parenting style of his

uncles. This young man, one of 13 siblings, reported that his father was a member of a ‘gang’ in New Zealand:

*Get a hiding ... from the uncles...yeah cop a hiding or if you got suspended ... cop a hiding... just their fists... slap you around. Maybe for about a week after that you’d be good ...and then you’d be straight back at it ... dad was never there, and he didn’t give a shit anyway ... haven’t seen him in a couple of years ... he was really into the gangs so he didn’t really care what we did ... (P.22).*

Problems at school that resulted in families adopting violent maladaptive coping strategies is noted above and also in the following comments:

*Ah...they just told me to go to school I didn’t really ...fuck with them ‘cause my uncles ...fucking big cunts and he’d have given me a hiding if I don’t go to school ...so yeah would have to go to school ..but by the time I have finished school ...I’d come back to my aunties and get back on sessions (P.2).*

Intergenerational violence, born out of the frustration of living in a toxic environment frequented by parental discord, arguments, and fights fueled by alcohol, is detailed in the following comments:

*My parents always arguing and fighting.... but there were times when it did impact the family big time ...as soon as you get a letter from school like saying this and that they would take the advantage of the letter to take out their anger on me based on what’s there and what they are thinking of as well so...he [father] had an anger, drinking problem...everything... (P.11).*

The conflict resulted in this young man leaving home and an Intervention Order placed on him by his mother. For this young man, along with many other participants, alcohol within the home environment was a problem that no doubt had a cumulative effect.

### ***Alcohol and/or illicit substance use – family context***

Separate to their own disclosed alcohol and/or substance use, five participants reported problematic alcohol and/or substance abuse within the family unit.

The following participant details his stepfather's alcohol abuse and how that influenced the home environment:

*Mayhem...um ...more or less most of the time 'cause of my stepfather he would come home like late or he would come home drunk or he would come home in a foul mood or something like that to set me off or set the whole family off and then everything would just go pear shape... (P.18).*

One participant presented as a resilient young man with good insight and acceptance of a life course that involved significant parental conflict, illicit substance use and DHS involvement. He also reported a positive life change following referral to a youth program and residential services:

*Oh yeah ...like they both had big heroin habits ... like my mums been clinically dead eight times... I was in and out of care most of my life. I've been in foster care ...at a younger age resi [residential care]. The last time I lived with my mum was probably around 12-13... oh yeah ...like they [parents] both had big heroin habits... (P.19).*

Another participant's cousins introduced him to alcohol and illicit substance use:

*Yeah, the other one just told me to smoke a ciggy, [cigarette] drink alcohol...like Jim Bean [whiskey] and stuff...yeah ...just ...and then while you skate you just want to relax with one can ...one cigarette ...got one or two again ...and then my cousin, he's like 'it's cannabis' ...what smoke that... yeah smoked it ...I was like ...dam ...I was stoned... (P.14).*

Another participant, from an intergenerational criminal family, linked alcohol to cultural family events, in this case a funeral:

*Always heaps of people over ...my dad's mates, all the Patch members [gang name], that was back home but over here just a bunch of us used to stay with my aunty over here and used to be about 20 of us hanging out ...it was always constant dramas ...big feeds and constant dramas ... only on the weekends ...oh sometimes depends what it was, if it was*

*like a 'tangi' which is a funeral it would go for three days and then on the third day they have a drink and then you don't know how long it will last... (P.22).*

One participant, who experienced racism outside the family home, also described a violent alcoholic father who eventually returned to Africa:

*He had an anger, drinking problem...everything...like February or March this year [last saw father] ... he put an Intervention Order on me ... (P. 11).*

Alcohol and/or illicit substance use, along with conflict and violence within the family home, are the main three themes in this section but other themes were also evident.

### ***Other family variables***

A sprinkling of other themes related to the family context emerged in the data. One young man described family expectations yet limited emotional support:

*Yeah ...me and my brother would do everything...look after my little sisters...clean the whole house, washing dishes, lawns, everything.*

When asked if he could speak to someone at home if needed he replied:

*Nah ...not really... (P.1).*

Some left the family home and led a transient lifestyle, and in these cases, formed kinships with peers:

*I wasn't basically home...I was basically at the station...yeah, I was homeless ... homeless, but not kicked out...ran away for about a month ...then a year and a half... I was 13...12...yeah...just me and all the boys... (P.2).*

Another young man was forced to leave home due to an Intervention Order. He describes the stress of being homeless and school attendance requirements:

*He put an Intervention Order on me so...he put one and then I was homeless for three months so half way through last year as well ...so I had to balance being homeless and going to school which was...was pretty hard at that time... (P.11).*

A young man who lived with his mother and siblings' details what could be considered an overly stressful situation for a single parent. He reported that when he was 14 his father returned to Kenya. This young man presented at the interview with a head cold and in an agitated state, with a strong body odor and missing teeth:

*I didn't spend much time [at home] ...after school... sometimes I came home drunk...yeah...mum would be pissed off ...she'd lecture me... (P.13).*

When their family ties were fractured, several participants turned to their peer group to create a sense of belonging and connection.

Two young men justified their behavior at home. The first normalised the experience of adolescence and then expressed regret:

*Back then ...yep I was only young at the time ...people give lectures, but I don't blame us ...I was only young at the time ...you know what young people do.*

He then added:

*I regretted what I done to my mum ...I used to steal money.... I used to think my mum was trash to me when I was young but ...yeah ...it's just now I don't do that ...fuck that... (P.2).*

The other young man expressed a combination of anger, grief, and regret while at the same time 'having the time of his life':

*At home, at school, fucken on the street, fucken everywhere ...I'd just seen it too much and just grabbed the brick and threw it at my step-dads head...and then yeah [quiet voice] ...I'd just had enough...I was like ...I didn't know why I was that pissed off...like fuck yous ...I'm fucken out of here ...fucken bullshit ...but I should of stayed 'cause my sisters fucken seen a lot too ... I fucken abandoned my sisters... but ...hey man I was having the time of my life going out, getting pissed, you know, fuck, you know...when I felt I didn't have any support and that, my whole entire life, was when my grandfather died 'cause I felt like oh there is no point in doing this... (P.4).*

For this young man the unresolved grief of losing his grandfather is poignant, and, ‘having the time of his life’ could also be envisaged as a sense of ‘hopelessness’.

While the data in the main reflects negative experiences, a positive theme was noted in relation to the value of a good education. This is mirrored in the following comments. The first participant described a ‘good’ home environment after his father, a source of conflict, returned to Africa. However, he was remanded towards the end of Year 12 following involvement with the courts:

*It was good at home ...oh they had been fighting a lot.*

The researcher asked how his mother responded when he left school:

*She [mum] was disappointed ...it’s like you almost finished your VCE... (P.5).*

Another participant talked about the importance his mother placed on education:

*She felt really sad [after he left school] ...’cause she was telling me ...you came to this country to do something... to go back to your home town and make up something or be a boss or be a something good in your future ...you know ...yep ...back to Africa ...and do something better ...’cause the family back there will be proud of you (P.6).*

The positive theme above, related to the families’ vision for a good education, was however clearly outweighed by negative themes. The data showed that all the parents, except for one, had separated, and that home life was enmeshed with conflict, violence, alcohol and/or substance abuse. This problematic home life seemed to contribute to a pattern of intergenerational violence with several young men placed on intervention orders. The refugee experience and the resultant fractured nature of these families was also noted along with school disruption and homelessness.

## **Neighbourhood**

Five participants reported difficulties within their neighbourhood. This included: peer association that led to pro-criminal attitudes and behaviour and, additionally, the experience of being bullied. Four participants identified a perceived ‘gang’ membership that involved local and out of suburb groups but also discussed aspects of family cultural membership that related to ‘patches and colours’. In New Zealand this refers to the identifying insignia of a street



gang. Two participants, from refugee background, felt isolated and had difficulty making friends. Four participants experienced a neighbourhood that was positive, quiet and enjoyable to live in.

### ***Negative, pro-criminal peer association***

Associating with some other young people in the neighbourhood was a precursor to pro-criminal behaviour for several young men. The problem is expressed in the following comments:

*When I was young I'd say the kids were pretty bad. They were people who know how to steal and swear...they taught me how to swear and stuff ...yeah ...back then the kids are ...were bad... about five of us... (P.10).*

*I used to play with this ... kid a lot and we used to get into trouble and do bad things and he was the one I burnt the factory down with [laugh] ... um... (P.15).*

The next young man identified the neighbourhood school as the place where he met his mischievous peer group:

*Went to [school], and that's when I started meeting up with some other mates and all that, I started getting into mischief and all that... ' (P.1).*

Aligning to, and being protective of, their own neighbourhood resulted in demarcation problems and peer solidity as a perceived way to protect territory. Moving from one locality to another was fraught with difficulties for the following young man:

*I only had probably ...not even that much mates... in [locality] yeah, I used to have heaps of mates but in [locality]my 'end-hole' that's the enemies town ..didn't have a lot of people I knew there ..probably had two mates... (P.2).*

Living in a cross-cultural neighbourhood led to the following young man of Maori Pacific Islander background feeling targeted and bullied. He reported long term bullying and isolation both in and out of school. It is interesting that he called the two people who targeted him his 'friends':

*Yeah...um...my two friends hit me 'cause they are wogs... (P.16).*

### ***Identification with 'gang' culture***

Gang membership brought with it a degree of status, as seen in the following comments when the young man was asked about his neighbourhood:

*Oh well it's been all over the place...they [family] moved...I got kicked out ...I got a placement ...staying in a squat for a bit....it used to be NVL and NSE.I was NVL and I got in the papers... (P.17).*

Being part of the culture was not easy:

*Oh, it was pretty rough...pretty rough...oh there was a lot of gangsters [laugh] ...yeah there was drugs everywhere... (P.20).*

Two participants identified New Zealand, their country of origin, as the source of gang culture:

*It was pretty friendly in Australia though ...but now back home [NZ] it is different... rough... you get killed over a colour...its stupid... (P.21).*

*Oh, we come from a very gang affiliated town, does that make any sense? No, you just put in work for the gang and then eventually you get your colours... (P.22).*

Gangs identify themselves to other members, rival gangs and the public by patches, colours, insignia and salutes.

### ***Isolated and disconnected***

A sense of belonging, even it was with a negative peer group, was not the case for all young men. For some, there was isolation and disconnection.

*Yeah...it's an Asian suburb so I had no friends ...my friends were my family I guess, my brothers and sisters... (P.12).*

*It was hard on me [neighborhood] 'cause I didn't know where to go and then I realised... it was a lot different to [locality] 'cause more old people... (P.13).*

### ***Positive neighbourhood***

Four participants had a positive connection to neighbourhood. They perceived the area as 'quiet' and 'nice' although there was a shift for one young man when he started drinking with peers.

*Oh yeah ...my neighbourhood was nice... (P.8).*

*Quiet ... (P.9).*

*It was quiet...yeah... (P.5).*

*I was brand new...I didn't know nothing ...it was mad ... it felt like I lived in a mad city... everything was just quiet...no troubles... yeah quieter ...it's perfect here...oh problems only started when I was going with my friends and that ...drinking and stuff... (P.14).*

Participants identified several factors, both in Australia and their country of origin, as pertinent to the neighbourhood in which they lived. For four participants, this experience was positive.

As discussed in the next section, for several young men, neighbourhood fostered pro-criminal attitude and behavior, and 'gang' affiliation.

### **Criminal involvement and law enforcement**

To gain an understanding of problems related to the onset of offending behaviour, the following questions were explored.

'Were you involved with the police, court system or youth justice system?'

'If you did get into trouble, was it by yourself or with other people?'

'What kinds of things did you get into trouble for?'

A requirement of the study was that all participants had been involved with the justice system.

Two themes stood out in the findings. Seven participants identified the role of co-offenders and the subsequent influence of peers; and seven highlighted a negative experience of their involvement with the police. The onset of involvement with the police ranged from 12 years of age to 17 years of age. One participant reported that the police had spoken to him when he was eight years of age. The type of offences ranged from minor, for example theft, to offences that resulted in incarceration, for example affray. Once on youth justice orders, four participants reported that their involvement with the youth justice system was a supportive one.

### ***Co-offending and negative peer influence***

Peer influence was a strong predictor for offending behaviour and involvement with the justice system. The context of peer involvement varied. For example, aligning with and supporting peers of a similar cultural background when an incident occurred; being led by other peers into offending behaviour; peer involvement in property damage (graffiti); and mutual involvement with illicit drugs. The following two participants, when asked if they were involved in criminal activity with peers, reported:

*Oh ...sometimes by myself, sometimes with other people ... yes just a few... (P.8).*

*With other people ...yeah ... I did ...a couple of months in Parkville... (P.9).*

For the next two young people, the offending occurred within the context of cultural support:

*Yeah... I never got into trouble for anything else except to do with like fighting people...[fights]... most of the time I reckon with friends ...yeah...sometimes like friends from my country ...you know what I mean... (P.12).*

*If my friends, see me punch on they all just run out of nowhere...I'd say ...I dunno like four African people ...like even though I don't know who you are...if you are in trouble they would just come and help you... (P.14).*

Reflecting on his own criminal activity, the following young man believed that he was 'used' and influenced by others:

*Did armed robberies...I was tricked ...I was tricked into armed robberies ...he would drop me off somewhere...drop me off to a certain location and I ended up with a knife in my hand and a bandana over my face saying, 'let's go over to his place' and I did it... (P.16).*

Property damage, in the form of graffiti along with illicit substance were also influenced by peers:

*I got arrested first time ever for criminal damage, graffiti ...like we graffitied this train and we were in the possession of cannabis, I had like two grams on me... (P.19).*

The next participant reported criminal activity during school hours. He would go to school, then abscond and break into houses to steal money to buy cannabis and return to school. There was a degree of peer involvement in his activities:

*Yeah...yep...I never used to like big things and that ...I used to get like money and that ... I used to spend it on like ... 'cause I used to smoke heaps of weed then... (P.1).*

The association with peers in the context of offending behaviour led to a ripple effect involving other services, notably the police.

### ***Police involvement***

Seven participants reported a negative experience in their dealings with the police. Primarily they felt that they were being unfairly targeted. This in turn led to suspicion and lack of trust. When these issues were further explored, some young men acknowledged that not all police officers and/or teams were 'bad'. Group gatherings in shopping centres resulted in perceived police discrimination:

*To be honest ...na I don't like the police around here ...like it's the way they operate. Like sometimes I go to this shopping centre... I just stand ...I just got there....and they are telling me off already ...I'm just like ...I'm just standing here talking to my mates and they are yelling at me already, telling me move on, if you don't they are giving me a ticket. I'm pretty sure it's a free place you can stand ...I'd just only be with two mates or three mates ... and they still tell me off...*

When I asked if this happens now, he replied:

*Yes ...oh now ...like it doesn't happen now not any more 'cause they have a new crew in ...team so they can ...so it's all better now ...but then ...yeah... (P.8).*

This perception of being unfairly targeted by the police is mirrored in the following comments:

*You'd just wake up at the police station [they] ask you. 'You did this, and you did that'. You know in your head that you didn't do it. I find them just ...bad people. Even though like sometimes I'm walking by myself, just walking ... they just come up to you for no reason. I'm just 'go away what do you want my name for? What do you want this for?'*

*They are saying that they take this as an argument ...an argument. They write it down and the next minute they find 'offensive language' when all you say to them is 'why do you want my name for?' ...why would I give you my name if I didn't do nothing ... I did nothing. They don't put what you said, they just put offensive language ...it happens a lot man... (P.14).*

The next young man was able to put into context how the violent death of his friend, and his own maladaptive coping, influenced his relationship with law enforcement:

*Oh...one of my friends passed away... yeah ...and then I started drinking heaps and got in mostly trouble with the police... I never liked them... still don't like 'em ...'cause I think I was right... (P.5).*

Seeking out support from the youth agency Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS), brought some resolve from the perceived, constant police harassment for this young man:

*Yeah...it's like ...I swear...the police are fucked up you know ...yeah...it was just like they were always on my back ...but I don't know why ...I always talk to YSAS...I always tell them problems with the police ...they are like...I lodged a couple of complaints ...and now it's like dropped a bit... (P.12).*

Allegations related to assault by police are detailed in the following comments:

*Oh ...cops were bad ...like ...they ...they beat me up...they beat me up and then interviewed me ...three [police officers] (P.20).*

Overall a dislike and lack of trust in the police was consistent in the findings:

*I don't like them... (P.13).*

*Cops here are dirty ... cops here are dirty with us [Islanders] ... yeah, our boys like [location] boys...just I'm hated by all the police... yeah... [treat you] ...like shit...oh they just pull you up out of nowhere, even when you are just walking down the street, even when I'm walking with my son I get pulled up... (P.22).*

While the relationship with police was mostly a negative experience for young offenders, the involvement of the youth justice was positively reported. It is interesting to note that seven participants of African descent felt supported by their teachers, two felt supported by youth justice yet seven felt unsupported or targeted by the police. A similar finding was evident with participants from Maori Pacific Islander background; four felt supported by their teachers, two felt supported by youth justice yet four had negative experiences police involvement.

### ***Youth justice system***

At least eight participants were involved in the youth justice system, and of these, seven spent time in detention. The following young man identified that his trajectory into crime occurred when his education was interrupted in Year 12:

*Yep.... been to jail too...as soon as I stopped studying I started getting into more trouble, they [police] just piled up all my history together ...then ...bang... (P.11).*

Other participants reported spending time in detention, some from a young age:

*Yeah ... I did ...a couple of months in Parkville... (P.9).*

*Yeah. I had police, courts ...um ...I think it would have been just after Year 8 was when I started getting locked up and all that ...that sort of stuff (P.17).*

*Yeah...I've been to court a lot of times ...in Melbourne Juvenile Justice ...I've had Probation, I've had two Youth Supervision Orders... (P.19).*

Entry into the youth justice system resulted in support and for some attitudinal change:

*It was good because I actually ...because I enjoyed it 'cause the worker ...was like ...she was telling me like I ain't going to see a life being locked up ...like she showed me the bigger picture...yeah...like ...don't take the wrong path or ...you've got to stay up this lane ...I just get into courses and all that ...and I actually ended up doing it... (P.12).*

*[Parkville Youth Justice Centre] ... treated like a king ...school was easy ...we got to play games ...I made shirts in there... (P.16).*

*It was alright...I was 12... (P.13).*

The following young man reported that his father was in custody:

*Yeah...he's in prison back home... (P.22).*

The data clearly suggests that, when these young males disconnected from the educational system, and sought belonging elsewhere, for most the trajectory in negative peer association, alcohol and/or illicit substance use, and criminal behavior was the norm. Other variables, including their relationship with the police, the family dynamic, along with mental health problems and homelessness can heighten these issues. Finding related to the participants' post-school experiences will be explored in the next section.

### **Post-school experiences**

The following questions were asked of participants in relation to their post-school experiences:

‘What happened when you left school?’

‘Did anyone from school talk to you about other educational programs, training programs or work options?’

Thematic analysis revealed both supportive experiences and negative in the participants' post school experiences. Nine participants were enrolled, or enrolment pending, in Technical and Further Education (TAFE), trade courses or apprenticeships. Three participants reported ambivalence and resistance to training, programs, and/or employment. Three were critical of the school system because they believed that they were not given direction. For seven young men there was a continuation of long term problems, for example, homelessness, conflict with peers, and drug and/or illicit substance abuse issues. Five participants noted the support that they received from YSAS and other sectors.

### ***TAFE, trade courses and apprenticeships***

The benefits of support and direction from school staff to assist in the transition into employment and/or TAFE enabled some participants to engage in positive activities as witnessed in the following comments:

*Yeah, I think we had a class [at school] called PD or something ...yeah, I did work experience ... building... (P.5).*



*Yep...um ...yeah...um I did a TAFE course... I did building constructions ...I got my white card for it and everything...yeah ...I'm looking now for work.... and then I work as a 'cause...I used to help the primary school kids... yeah ...um ...cleaner, in cleaning up after school... (P.6).*

*Yeah ...and he's [girlfriend's father] ... the one that runs the mechanics section [Handbreak Turn] ...so he got us to want to do it ... they would treat us more like adults. And they would talk to us, on our lunch break they would sit down and have a coffee, I don't drink coffee, but I was sitting having coffee with others...they would talk to us all like adults about cars...did all stuff like adults would do. Like teach us in the staff rooms and then ... (P.10).*

The following young man reported that staff from the special schools that he attended gave some direction about future pathways:

*Yep, I finish off this year... [VCAL Y11] ...and I dunno ...I'll probably figure out TAFE courses I might want to do sometime this year I'll figure something out.*

When asked if school staff talked about training programs or work options he replied:

*Not at any mainstream school or anything... in places like [two special schools] they were more onto like, 'what you going to do after this?' Like mainstream they were like 'What are you going to do tomorrow?' (P.19).*

The two participants who left school in Year 8 'hung out' on the streets for some time before attending TAFE, however, one left TAFE when he was bullied:

*Construction yes [at TAFE] ... oh ...man ...I didn't like it, but I didn't care ... (P.16).*

The second gained employment as a carpenter. He remained one month at TAFE then left due to conflict with the teacher; it appears that he was not coping with the theoretical component:

*Start doing carpentry there ... I worked with them for a month ... they went bankrupt... I was going back to TAFE and then me and my teacher at TAFE didn't see eye to eye ... I basically just told him like you know 'go fuck yourself' I'll just go find my own thing... I don't function too well sitting there with a white board full of numbers...so I was trying*

*to explain that to him...he just kept raising his voice ...just dictating stuff so I just told him I was going... (P.18).*

The transition into trade based activities was a smoother process when young men were offered individualised support. This often did not occur.

### ***Support versus lack of support***

Three participants perceived that they did not receive direction about career pathways during their secondary school years. For those who left school early, deficits in literacy, numeracy, and social skills exacerbated the problem and subsequent sustainability. Four participants were appreciative of YSAS support. Resistance, ambivalence, and a sense of hopelessness was reported by a few participants. One young man could articulate the regret he felt leaving school early.

When asked if their school talked about training programs and work options, the following replied:

*Na... (P.2).*

*No ...that's the problem ...I know what I want to ...like I'm trying to get a path ...where to go and all that ... to be honest with you, I couldn't understand like what she [career advisor] was on about ...'cause she'd move to one thing and then she would jump to another... (P.12).*

*Not at any mainstream school or anything... (P.19).*

YSAS Revel program was supportive, beneficial and a protective influence on 'at risk' behaviour;

*I used to come here [YSAS] when I used to be near the station... (P.2).*

*YSAS are helping me... (P.6).*

*[YSAS] keep you off the streets...they got different programs of things you can do... (P.11).*

*YSAS is good. I like them here 'cause they help... (P.20).*

Many other factors influenced the trajectory from school to employment and/or training programs. For example: involvement in alcohol and/or illicit substances; peer conflict, and homelessness. The following participant articulated the regret he now feels because he did not stay at school:

*I just wished that I had of liked...stayed at school and that...put my head down and shit ...and spent a little bit more time studying and shit ...'cause now I can study...now I'm like know shit that I would never have learnt back then. And the difference is I actually understand it now... (P.4).*

He added that fear of embarrassment and failure were a problem, and, in the following points, emphasised that tests were not the only tool teachers can utilise.

*If I had of got that fear out of me [tests] while I was in school...fuck man ...I would have been able to accomplish so much shit... (P.4).*

The post-school experiences show that for many young men the transition to TAFE and/or trade options was a relatively smooth course. Support and direction assisted in this process; the support included community schools and YSAS. However, for those young men who left school early, the transition was fraught with difficulties and failure. Most participants were able to reflect on their journey and envisage the changes that needed to occur to sustain schooling.

### **Participants' recommendations**

To elicit from the participant information about what could have sustained their education and prepared them for the workforce, the following leading question was explored:

‘Can you think of anything that could have interrupted the course you have taken?’

The young men's concern was what they perceived as changes in the teaching staffs' attitudes. This was followed by changes in the school curriculum and school surrounds, and finally some direction and implementation in relation to a career pathway and trade options.

### ***Teaching staff's attitudes***

Twenty-seven recommendations from the young men related to changes in staff's attitudes towards students. Participants requested that teachers be more understanding and empathetic of their individual situations, particularly in relation to learning difficulties and life situations.

The following comments express the above concerns, the first young man acknowledged his own failings:

*To be honest I stuffed up a little, bit but then I've tried to change my ways, but they [teachers] still acting the same towards me. Like with me I'm not like quick at picking up things... it takes me a little bit of time... (P.8).*

Participants wanted the teachers to be more understanding of their circumstances:

*Teachers more or less have a closer understanding to where you're coming from... that will sit there and relate with you, not just tell you what to do... (P.18).*

*I think they [schools] just need to understand like how each kid is different. I know they don't like to treat kids differently to each other but sometimes kids **are** different, and they need a little more ease on what's going on. If you don't live with your parents ...or if you've got an issue with drugs, the same kind of tactics aren't going to work like say with other students... (P.19).*

This need to be acknowledged, understood and treated individually is mirrored in feelings of embarrassment and shame:

*I'd make sure that they listened to every single student and make time for every single student ...I was so embarrassed ...I didn't know like sometimes tables or some homework or some other complicated shit. I used to just walk out and have a smoke 'cause I was like ashamed ...' (P.4).*

*Something to help the students ...like the ones that are quiet, the ones that sit in the back and don't say anything... ' (P.20).*

Some participants expressed the need to be heard and their opinions to be validated:

*If I was like a principal ... I would [ask] people, 'What would you want to do at school?'* (P.2).

*They [teachers] didn't like hearing me say anything in class so they didn't like my opinion about things because my opinion used to be different...* (P.15).

More time to finish work was important for this young man:

*They [students] aren't going to learn just by getting forced to hurry up. That's going to make them not remember properly. Like sometimes they say, 'just read the book'. But then they don't explain it...* (P.10).

The need to communicate with students was expressed in the following comments:

*You [teachers] just need to talk to the students* (P.6).

*Instead of like being so harsh, trying to speak to the students ...whatever the situation is...* (P.10).

They requested more chances in relation to suspensions/expulsions, to not be labelled, and to be treated equally.

*I reckon they shouldn't kick people out unless they do something bad. They should give them one more chance. When I left school ...I wanted to go back ...* (P.5).

*I wouldn't be like too strict on them for something little ...it's hard to explain...they [teachers] play unfair sometimes. I stuffed up a little bit but then I've tried to change. But they [teachers] still acting towards [me]the same...* (P.8).

*No favourites ...I know there is always a lot of favourites. Treat [everyone] the same and acknowledge one at a time...* (P.21).

*From what I have experienced, there is a lot of favouritism...* (P.15).

Additionally, it was suggested that teachers be trained in mediation skills to mediate conflict between peers.

*I would get them both together and just let them talk it out ...and I'd give them a choice...shake hands and become friends or both of you get suspended ...you know what I mean... (P.12).*

The findings clearly indicate that the young males involved in the study wanted a change in teacher's attitudes and understanding, especially in relation to their home/life situation, learning capability and pent up emotions.

Participants also recommended changes in the school curriculum, and school surrounds.

***Make school entertaining, meaningful and individually tailored for transition to the workforce***

Fourteen participants recommended changes in this area. They would like the learning environment to be more entertaining and meaningful, with curriculum tailored individually to better enable transition to training and/or job opportunities:

*Make it entertaining, instead of sitting in class doing all this fucking algebra shit. Come up with some compromising thing to work on. Do it outside instead of being ... in the class sitting there ... (P.17).*

*Some sort of program that is cheap and easy. I don't know how much YSAS would cost, but something like that...' (P.15).*

*What you learn in school, you need 20 percent of that to be used in the real world. Every school has different types of groups. There are the kids that just learn hard, kids that just cruise through school, there's the kids that don't care much about school ... they just have to be there... (P.11).*

Only three of the 20 participants successfully completed their secondary schooling. The following participant recommended that information relevant to career pathways be introduced at an earlier stage:

*Things to help more, like set up to help like work in the future. They have heaps of things to set up for uni, but they didn't have much TAFE. For people that aren't so good at concentrating at schoolwork ... more ...pre-apprenticeship studies for an apprenticeship ...like more hands-on stuff... (P.1).*

When asked if he had the opportunity to explore this area at school, he replied:

*They said I have to wait 'till I finish Year 10. I got to ... like Year 9, there was a pre-apprenticeship thing. I had to travel...but that wasn't through school ...that was from my parents. My school told me that I had to go to school or I would have to leave... (P.1).*

Participants identified the need to make school attuned to their interests, especially for those students who find the academic side of school work challenging. Some participants recommended sports programs.

### ***Sports programs***

Three of the 20 participants recommended that sports activities be integrated into the school curriculum. The following young man had a history of school suspensions, but he connected well to a sports academy:

*They should give more chances I reckon...[the] sports academy, I never got suspended once there... (P.5).*

The need for sports programs was reiterated by the following two participants:

*More sports at every school... (P.14).*

*More hands on like stuff ...like Vkick they had at school... (P.20).*

Several other stand-alone recommendations were also included in the findings.

### ***Other recommendations***

One student suggested student friendly places within the school surrounds:

*More hangout spots probably ...more spots to chill back ... (P.2).*

Another perceived that staff racism was a problem:

*[long pause] ...if I was going to run a school I would check all my staff thoroughly ...and I'd make sure that they're not racist...[pause] (P.4).*

The third recommended after school programs at the secondary school level:

*Like most schools, they don't have any after school programs ...like 'because I know they has that in primary school but in high school they should... (P.11).*

The following student would like to see the inclusion of social and political issues on the agenda:

*I would teach people about brutality, police brutality, [and] politics. If you learn politics when you are young then you understand it when you are older, so you know what you're doing, and you know how the country's run and stuff. They don't teach us that... (P.21).*

The next participant recommended cultural mentors within the teaching staff:

*Maybe people that have made it from different people's cultures. Someone that people can relate to like ...successful...I dunno ...maybe raise people's spirits a bit... (P.22).*

This need to feel heard and understood is mirrored in the final participant's comments:

*Younger counsellors can more or less relate to you. It's just that they know where you are coming from ...can relate to you and not be judgmental towards you... (P.18).*

As mentioned above, the three main areas of recommendation were in relation to the staff attitude, the need to make school interesting and relevant to future pathways, and the need to integrate sports programs into the curriculum. Several 'stand-alone' recommendations were also included in this section.

## **Chapter summary**

In answer to the research question 'From young male offender's perspectives, how do school experiences relate to offending behaviour?', the findings suggest several factors within the school and surrounds that are likely to influence a trajectory into criminal behaviour. Compounding these problems were other variables, including the family and/or neighbourhood environment, peer associations, and alcohol and/or illicit substances. The experiences of school and the school environment drew a mixed response with most respondents who reported difficulties including: learning problems, emotional dysregulation (anger), being a victim of bullying and racism, and externalised behaviour problems.



The relationship with the teaching staff identified both risk and protective factors. Many young men felt overwhelmed and unable to cope with the school work and therefore required more individualised and tailored programs. In addition, they perceived that teaching staff did not understand or appreciate the difficulties they experienced with their school work and at home. The young men spoke of feeling connected and validated when interacting with teaching staff who exhibited pro-social qualities, for example: empathy, humour, and a non-judgemental attitude. The study found that these young men wanted school to be meaningful through viable options that would lead to employment. This they believe requires more vocational education, 'hands on' TAFE / trade pathways at an earlier stage. Additional sports programs at school were also supported.

The findings identified that when the young men were not coping or falling behind with their school work, they would feel embarrassed and/or singled out in front of their peers. An alternative option was to connect with peers with similar issues and disconnect either partially or wholly from mainstream education. At times, this decision was made by the school via expulsion. The solution nevertheless, was fraught with difficulties and the onset of a downward spiral into drug and/or alcohol use, petty crime and, for some, serious criminal activity. For the young men who left school at an early age, problems were exacerbated. Relationships then shifted to, overall, negative experiences of the police and, at times, a connection and positive experiences of statutory and non-statutory services, for example, Berry Street, YSAS, and youth justice. When supported through this process, their post-school experiences tended to be fragmented yet relatively stable for some but not all.

Finally, recommendations and suggestions about how emerging problems could be managed differently were explored. Most participants welcomed the opportunity to reflect on their past and suggest changes. The recommendations fell into three categories. The overriding response was for a change in teachers' attitudes and behaviours, followed by changes in the school work and school environment, and finally more emphasis on employment pathways including TAFE/trade options.

## **CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS– FOCUS GROUPS**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the overall research is to better understand the lived school experiences of 20 young males aged 16-21, and how those experiences may influence a trajectory into criminal behaviour.

The goal of the focus groups was to invite representatives from the education, justice and the youth sector to validate and comment on the emerging themes that emerged from the interviews of these young males; to enquire as to whether the findings make sense, ‘...and if not, why not’? (Polgar & Thomas 2008, p.251). Additionally, what this could mean for policy and practice.

The section outlines the sample description, and the identified themes.

### **First Focus Group in Dandenong – setting the context**

A flyer (Appendix 8) was distributed to local primary and secondary schools, an independent school for disengaged young people, youth justice, YSAS, local police, and a local youth service in the Dandenong area. Four participants expressed interest in, and subsequently attended, the focus group. The focus group participants were: the facilitator (F), assistant facilitator (AF), a senior worker with YSAS (SW1), an organisation that provides a range of programs for young people aged 12 to 21 who are experiencing problems related to alcohol and/or drug use; a youth justice worker (YJ), a teacher with many years of experience in both mainstream and independent schools (T1); and a senior worker (SW2) with another local youth service that provides a wide range of services to young people aged 25 and under. Both youth services work with young refugees.

The youth justice representative had to leave the group early due to an unexpected work commitment therefore her comments are not included in the findings. Following discussions with one of my supervisors, it was agreed that a second focus group of three members would be helpful to assist credibility. For convenience, this was conducted in the Geelong area. The names of the members of both focus groups were deidentified.

The first focus group was conducted at YSAS, Dandenong on the 22 August 2016 for a duration of one hour. Participants were given a copy of the Explanatory Statement prior to the session

and were asked to revisit the document on the day before signing the Consent Form. The purpose of the focus group, to assist trustworthiness, is discussed in Chapter 4.

Each group member was given an agenda and ground rules (Appendix 7). A self-report youth participant demographic (Appendix 9) was tabled for perusal. The session was audiotaped.

The second focus group was conducted at the researcher's office in Geelong on the 11 October 2016, the process was the same as above.

### **Overall themes**

Emergent themes were selected from the following priori codes, as detailed above in Part 1. Participants' comments related to themes and questions for the focus group were drawn from subcategories:

- How the young person experienced their school work and the educational environment, including any referrals for supplementary support.
  - Language and/or learning difficulties
  - Bullying
  - Externalised behaviour
  - Student/teacher relationships
- Issues pertaining to family life and the home and surrounding environment.
  - Conflict and /or violence and alcohol and /or drug use in the family home
- Problems related to the onset of offending behaviour and/or peer involvement.
  - Co-offending and negative peer influence
  - Police involvement
- Post school experiences including recommendations.
  - Staff attitudinal change
  - Individually tailored programs

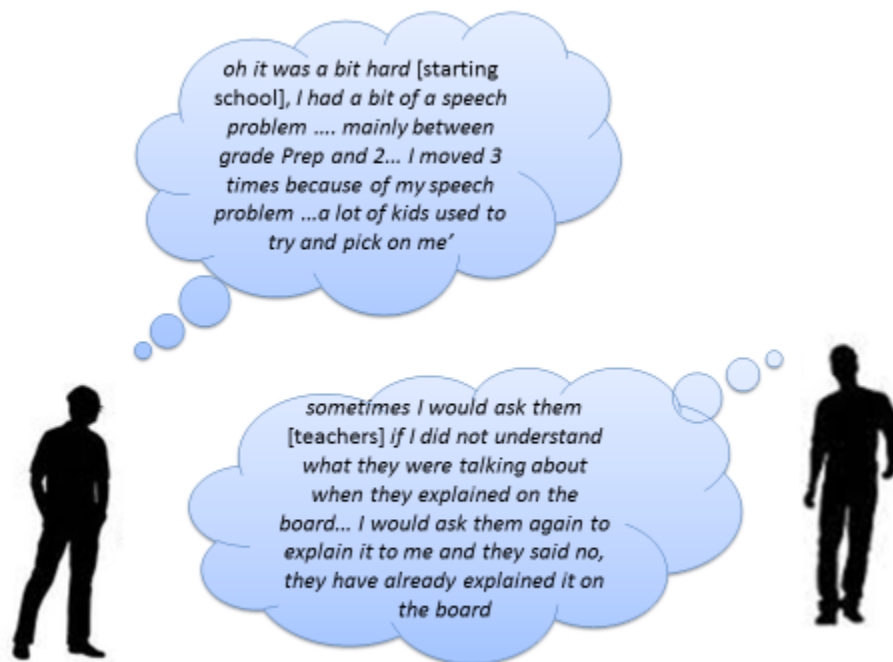
**How the young person experienced their school work and the educational environment including any referrals for supplementary support.**

Four questions related to the following theme were identified in this section.

***Language and / or learning difficulties***

The following comments were presented to the focus group, including the quotes in bubbles.

Five young men experienced language and / or learning difficulties. This in turn led to feelings of isolation, sadness and despondency and, from peers, racism and bullying.



**Q. Does this finding surprise you? I am interested in your thoughts.**

The focus group members discussed the following:

Early identification of language and or learning difficulties, the importance that the style of learning is consistent with a young person's presentation and underlying needs, and the stigma associated with this area.

T1 commented on the need for assessment and intervention processes in early primary school to identify difficulties, if this does not occur then problems will compound:

*Young people with a speech and language difficulty... not accepted by their peers [results]in a bad start.... if it's not being picked up in primary school ...access to special needs and additional services ...it's just going to exacerbate.*

SW1 identified closely with this theme due to the difficulties he experienced at school because of dyslexia. He emphasised the need for alternatives to what he described as the 'book' style of learning:

*Young people [in] my program...don't have fond memories of school at all ...especially the book style of learning.*

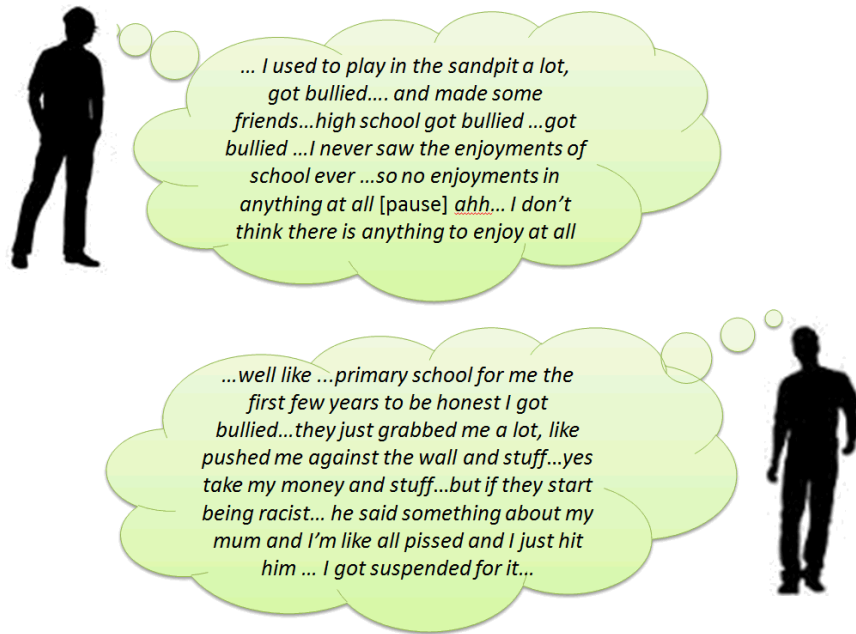
SW2 focused on the issues related to refugees, the various transitions, paper work trail and the assumptions made at the time:

*[The process of] ...resettlement ... childhood development... schooling...major transition into secondary school. Education presumes that [individual case notes] would have come with the file, but the file is with immigration. [It is assumed] that assessments were done early.*

The members' comments concurred with the clients' reports and additionally gave some depth to complexities from an academic context. Other variables associated with this theme, for example, specific difficulties associated with the refugee population were identified.

### ***Bullying***

Six participants reported incidents of being bullied both within and outside of the school grounds. At times the bullying was underpinned by racism. The experience would manifest in revenge and retribution.



**Q. What is your experience of the level to which students are willing to share with teachers and workers their experiences of being bullied?**

There was consensus that bullying is an ongoing phenomenon in schools, and as T1 reported, it does not stop there:

*Bullying ... has, you know, far reaching consequences.*

She further added that disclosure of the bullying within a mainstream school setting was a difficult process:

*Working as a secondary school teacher I'm not necessarily so sure kids disclose as much... it takes a sort of almost a withdrawal of program for them to be talking about that.*

SW2 put some context around the complexities of disclosure:

*Disclosure to schools is problematic because once you say something in a school environment all hell breaks loose. Because of a range of mandatory reporting ... I have heard [that] the good teachers, once the young person starts to speak, they say 'wait...don't tell me anything' stop them because they have got to be on the phone ...it's*

*the 'dob in' thing ...if you say something you will increase your target ability. The bullying stuff is so complicated, it operates on so many levels.*

SW1 reflected on his own work experiences and how his clients perceived police profiling as a type of authority bullying:

*The police profile them, they get categorised and judged because they are all moving together...I've got numerous young men I've sat with and they just ...part of their day has been being picked on for being Afghani.*

The findings were consistent with the participants' comments and again fleshed out the complexities of disclosure. For example, from a student level – personal safety risks associated with 'dobbing'; teacher level - reporting paper work trail; and authority level – mandatory requirements. The discussion ventured into other aspects of what young men perceived as bullying.

### ***Externalised behaviour***

Anger and/or behavioural problems in the school setting, at times underpinned by embarrassment, were identified by eight participants involved in the study. The problem behaviour would present in various forms such as anger, bullying others and fights.



**Q. I would like your thoughts and opinion on the participants' trajectory from initially feeling embarrassed to externalised behaviour.**

The members identified and normalised the pathway for young males when underlying frustrations related to educational performance are not addressed. They acknowledged that emotions can be expressed in a negative and unhelpful manner as suggested by SW1:

*If ...frustrations start that early ...if you are pushed along enough and if it's a young male's testosterone has kicked in by that time and they need to express their feelings...call it antisocial, call it anger outburst, impulse control, emotional regulation ...whatever you label it ...it's not surprising.*

SW2 concurred with the desperation exhibited by the participants:



*And all the way through that he is screaming about what he needs ... 'I can't read...I can't write...I don't get it.*

T1 noted the short term 'cudos' and distraction from the task at hand that some students look for in these situations to save face and remain in control:

*The cudos that kids get in school from being the angry sort of person...as opposed to the one who is struggling with work is important. There are a number of young people who would far rather be the person that the teacher was scared of than the one that needs the extra support because they are not coping academically.*

She added:

*The teacher initially sets the tone for the class and when young people threaten to either hit you or throw a chair... they're seizing control of that class ...and invariably they are out of the class but ... they feel powerful.*

This scenario can then play out in the reactive management strategies schools adopt to contain the young person so that others are safe:

*And generally, what they do in schools with those young people is to Velcro a teaching aid to them, [use] management to keep them away from other people in the playground. There is no other learning support for their needs, it's to make sure that other people are safe around them. It's a really bad system.*

SW1 reflected on his own knowledge and experience of those students not noticed in the school setting who internalise feelings and become depressed:

*The other one is the freeze response ... when they stay there, and people do nothing...the depression sets in ...the despondence or isolation ...and they just withdraw totally, which isn't picked up in the classes because they are quietly managed.*

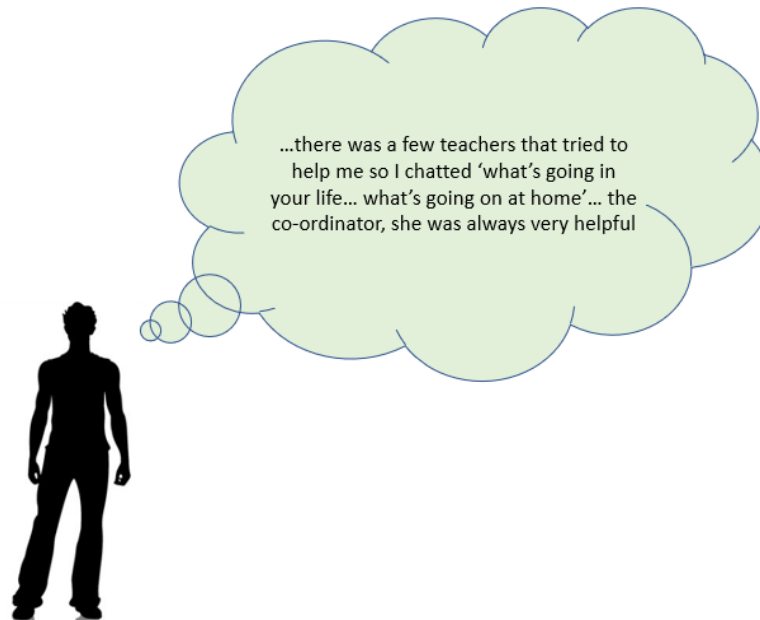
Or as stated by T1:

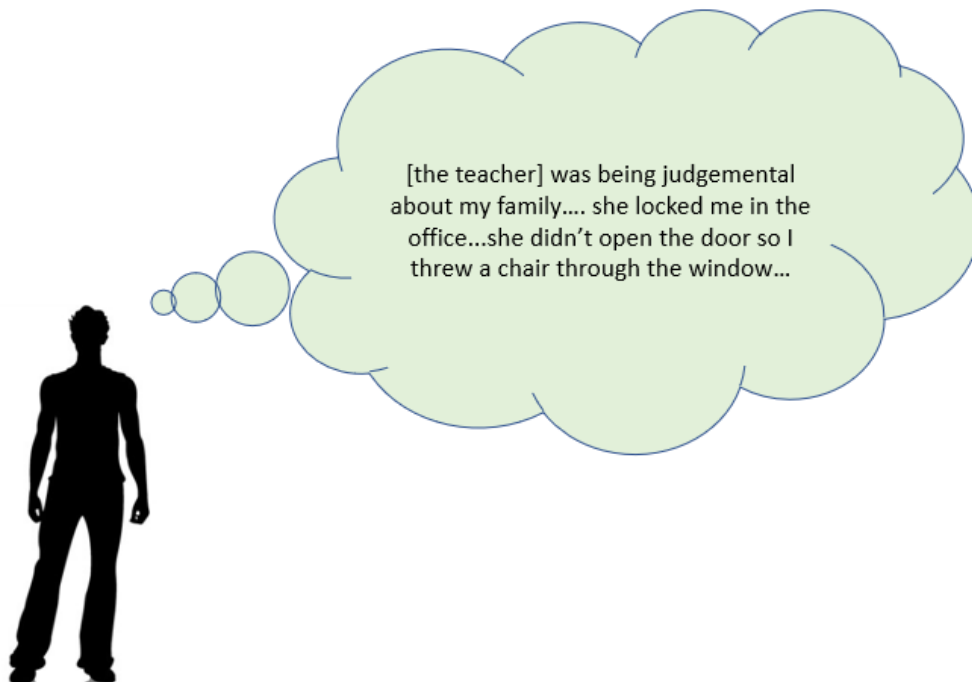
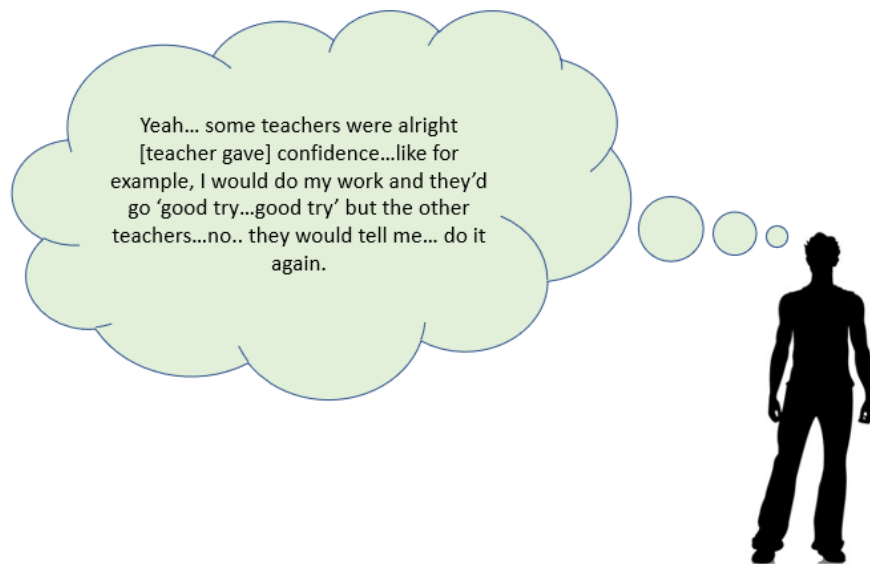
*Often don't even make it to school.*

The frustrations related to learning difficulties the young people expressed were clearly identified and articulated by the focus group members. This pathway from feelings of embarrassment and frustration to externalised and at time internalised behaviour and furthermore how schools manage these phenomena was discussed.

### ***Student /teacher relationships***

Seven participants reporting a positive, supportive relationship with a number of teachers (it should be noted that six of the seven participants were of African background); six participants reported both supportive and unsupportive teachers; two participants reported support from individual teachers (including one cultural teacher); and five participants felt generally unsupported.





**Q. Your thoughts on the factors that may have influenced these findings?**

Normalising the humanity of teachers, developing trust and respect, building and sustaining relationships were envisaged by the focus group members as key answers to the question.

SW2 commented:

*Everything that happens with humans is based on relationships ... there are good teachers [and] there are bad teachers.*

The importance of adopting prosocial interactions and strategies that can result in bonding and a positive teacher/student relationship was noted by SW1 who cited the African young men:

*What I've found with the African young men, if you start off the relationship with respect [respect will] normally follow. If that relationship is built on a little bit more of a authoritarian, or speaking down to, they start to question ... 'well I've done nothing wrong to tell me off in the first place'.*

T1 believes this relationship bonding is more likely to occur in primary school but also comments on, in general, prosocial qualities and the detrimental and long-term effects of the 'bad' experiences:

*Young people will have a more favourable opinion of a primary school teacher than a secondary teacher because of their experience. The teachers in primary school are generalists, [they] nurture the whole child whereas secondary teachers are specialists'. 'Young people know a good teacher, they know someone who is genuine, who shows them respect. Negative experiences will stick in kids' minds... it can make or break a young person's school experience.*

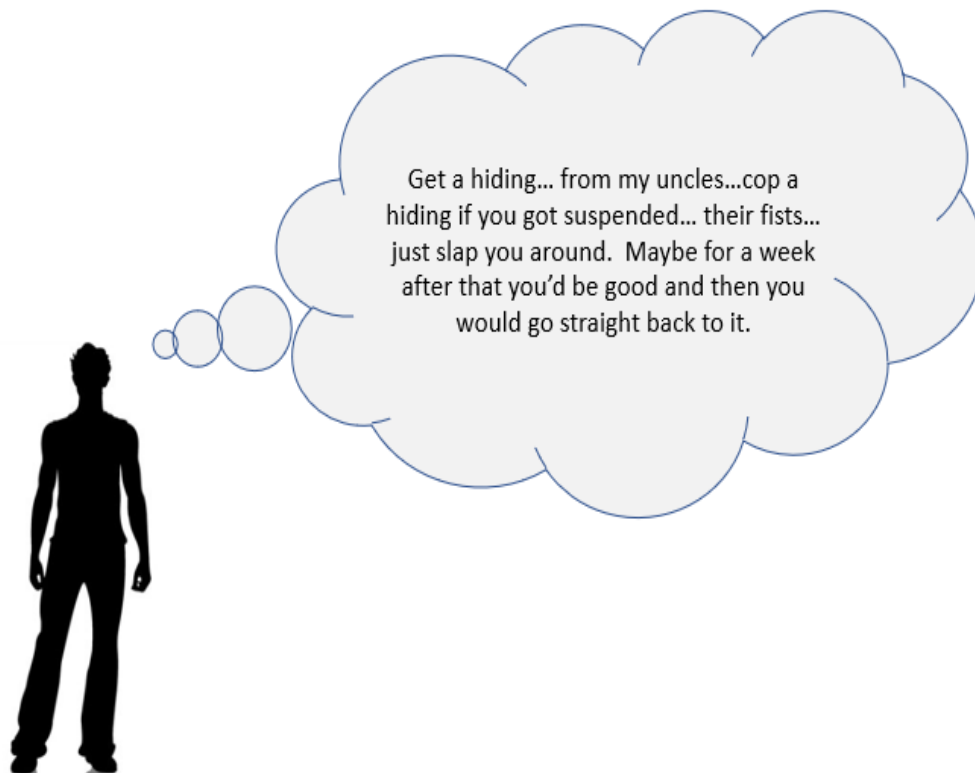
Both T1 and SW2 acknowledged the difficulties that teachers face within the educational, structural and cultural milieu of school:

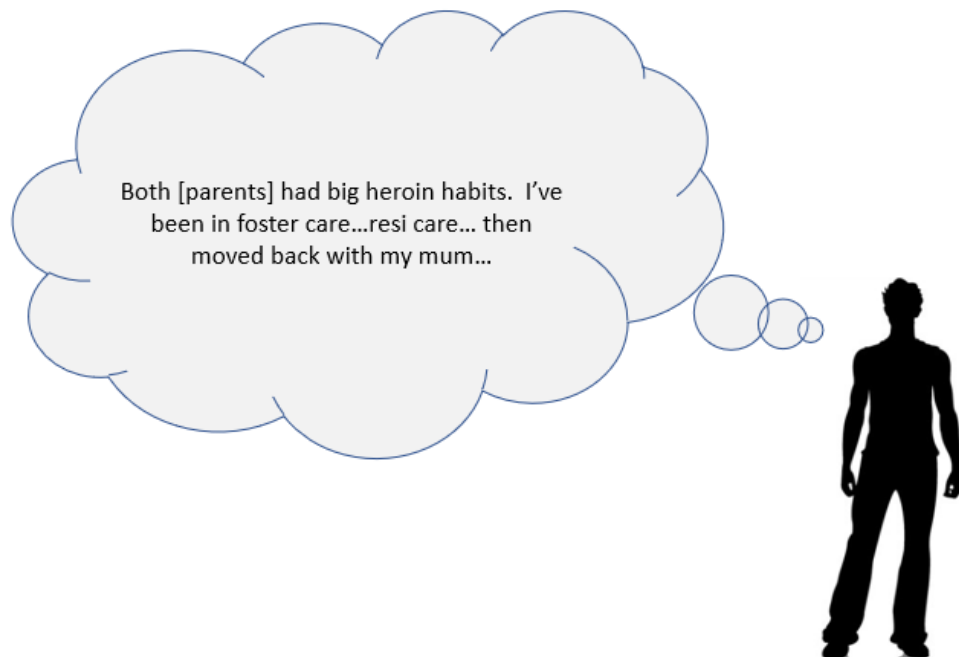
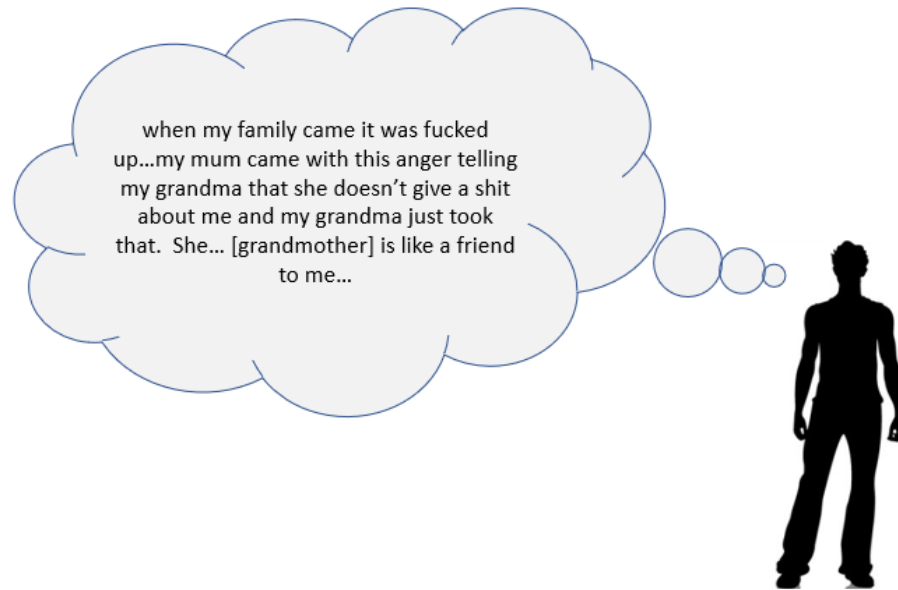
*Teachers in schools are kind of weighed down with a lot of the stuff they have to prescribe to ...they have to be the monitor...they have to be the disciplinarian.*

The focus group members could give a balanced appraisal of how student /teacher relationships are formed, the importance of sound relationships and also the constraints.

### **Conflict and/or violence, and alcohol and/or drug use in the family home**

The predominant theme was ‘conflict in the family home’ as reported by 10 of the 20 participants. For several participants, the refugee experience and the resultant fractured nature of these families is demonstrated in the findings. Five participants reported entrenched family violence; five participants reported alcohol and/or drug use.





**Q. Do you think school staff are cognisant of the lived home experiences of students?**

The focus group members acknowledge there may well be an awareness of students' lived home experiences. However, several factors may influence a response.

SW2 cited the importance of school leadership:

*Some schools I think know the general socioeconomic stuff going on in their cohort, some others don't, it depends on the leadership of the school.*

T1 touched on teachers' priorities and the skill base required for assessment:

*You really need to be quite skilled educationally wise to deal with them and I don't think it necessarily is available, in mainstream schools where there has to be a push for academic curriculum.*

What schools can do when the circumstances arise with young people is articulated by SW1:

*I think they may be aware, but I don't know what they can do about it and I think that's what they feel, what can they do about it?*

Discussion then centred on the families' priorities and how they are influenced by acute socioeconomic needs and the ability to cope: SW1 talked about the families that presented to his service:

*Families have very little focus on their child's education. The families we are working with, that [education], is so far down on their priorities, on their 'to do' list, that they are surviving daily. [Their] goal is to make sure we get Centrelink next week.*

SW2 referred to the participants' demographic, then reported a case study example that exemplified the importance of education, that it is valued:

*All but one of them, their parents, are separated. There are very specific economic reasons that the boy here (Afghani) is the alpha in the family, he has probably got eight to ten people in Pakistan waiting for money. And it doesn't mean they don't value education, they have no choice. So that value conversation is huge.*

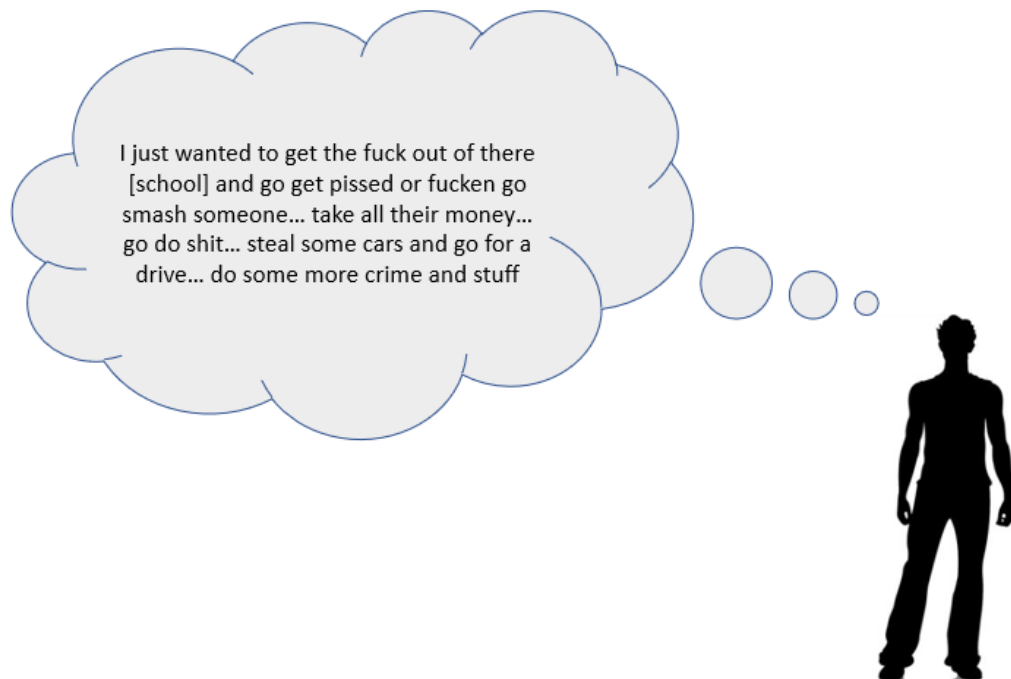
T1, who has significant experience of working with the Indigenous population, discussed what sits behind some of the difficulties within that community:

*Yes ...Indigenous young people ...there will be very real reasons why education is not on the table because it takes people away from home, it takes people away from communities.*

In summary, there was consensus from focus group members that education is valued by families. However, many socioeconomic challenges of a broad and specific nature can influence pathways and outcomes.

### **Co-offending and negative peer influence**

The young men involved in the study reported that their relationships with peers was primarily of a negative nature - bullying, conflict, fights and alcohol and/or illicit substance use. Nevertheless, the connection resulted in a sense of identity and status. The below young males responded to the researcher's questions.





**Q. Do you find that there is a transfer of negative peer influence from the community to the school surrounds? If so, how is this managed?**

SW2 challenged this question with a belief that the source of peer group behavioural problems is within the school system:

*Is it a transfer into the school environment or is the poor experience in school the transfer out into the community of bad behaviour? I think it is that!*

T1 commented that if young people feel overwhelmed or lost in the school system they will naturally turn to a similar peer group for support and affiliation. This can often result in feeling pressured or led:

*A huge school like 2500 kids with 55 plus language groups, I think sometimes kids get lost there so they look to make connections to avoid bullying or feel safe, so they will kind of congregate in an open place. I think there is an element of young people sticking together ... sometimes it can be ethnicity. If you don't feel that you belong to the school, you can belong to a group of other young people of a similar background. The criminal element can sometimes be an escape...just sheer frustration might just drive you to go out and get a car. In my experience a lot of the resi kids do it because they are trying to escape...so there is pressure to do stuff.*

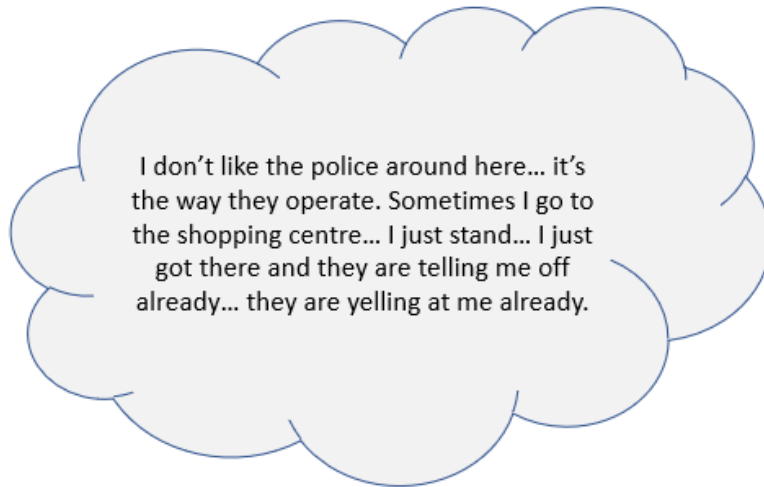
With this question, the members reflected on the environment of schools and how young people may be feeling overwhelmed and isolated within this environment. Connecting with a negative peer group in some ways was an escape and an emotional safety buffer.

### **Police involvement**

Seven participants reported a negative experience in their dealings with the police. Primarily, they felt that they were being unfairly targeted; this in turn led to suspicion and lack of trust. When these issues were explored further, some young men acknowledged that not all police officers and/or teams were 'bad'.



I find them [police] bad people.  
Sometimes walking by myself... they  
come up to you for not reason. I'm just  
'go away, what do you want my name  
for?' ... they take that as an argument...  
they find offensive language... it happens  
a lot man.



I don't like the police around here... it's  
the way they operate. Sometimes I go to  
the shopping centre... I just stand... I just  
got there and they are telling me off  
already... they are yelling at me already.



**Q. Do you think that having greater positive police involvement at school could reduce offending behaviour and change perception of the police?**

The normalisation of adolescence as a period of transition, when authority is more likely to be challenged was picked up by SW2:

*Adolescent development is finding out who you are as a human... to [challenge] authority.*

Nevertheless, SW1 commented that a perception of fear on both sides may underpin relational interactions:

*If young people are walking home at night [as a] group... just going somewhere, and they are not substance affected or doing anything wrong when the police approach them, they will be fearful. And then straight away that starts a reaction that is nearly always negative.*

Additionally, while a resource officer in the schools may be perceived as positive and beneficial, the organisation is driven by subgroups with different perceptions and agendas. Victoria police Youth Resource Officers are assigned to Local Government Areas. SW2 stated:

*We are dealing with this organisational culture or the perception of it.*

SW1 added:

*Having programs where police go into schools and talk to the schools is good...it's good for those police, young people can feel safe with those police. But if you have another part of the police department that has been given a permit to go and target perceived anti-social behaviour where there are young people congregating in public places, and the way they do that is through intimidation and moving on, no matter what you do in the schools [it] isn't going to benefit those engagements at all. Those police have a totally different agenda to the police that are going into the schools [with a positive agenda].*

T1 discussed her experience of youth resource officers in the school system:

*They have youth resource officers. One has a great relationship with one of my young people that I work with.*

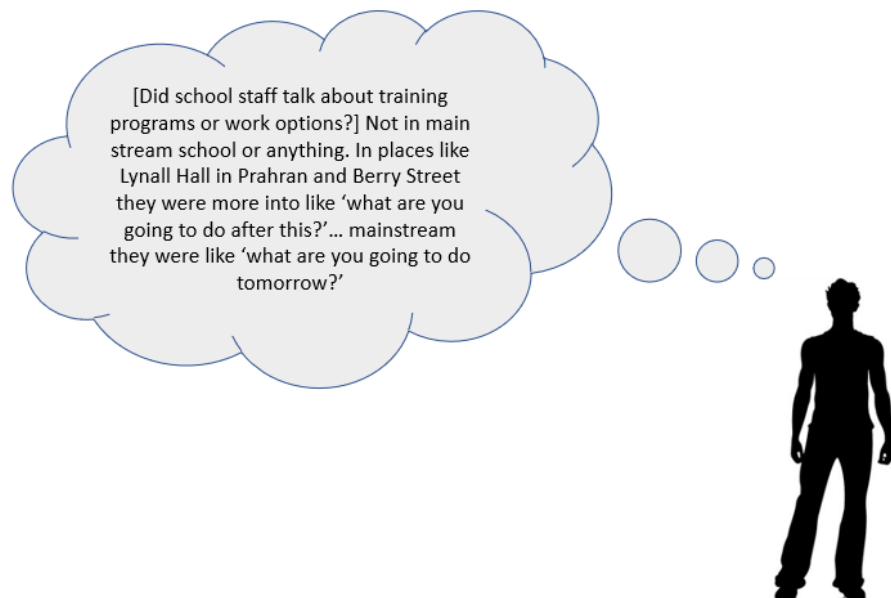
In the final comments SW2 reflected on the power in the words above from one young man, his insight and willingness to acknowledge positive change:

*Because they [young people] identify good relationships...they identify a change...that's powerful...that's really powerful.*

The responses from the focus group members clearly supported the participants at times poor relations with the police, primarily around specific operational procedures. That young men are willing to keep an open mind and note change in this interaction, was envisaged as powerful.

### **Post school experiences**

Nine participants were either enrolled in, or enrolment pending, in Technical and Further Education (TAFE), trade courses or apprenticeships. Three participants reported ambivalence and resistance to training, programs, and/or employment; three were critical of the school system because they believed that they were not given direction. For seven young men there was a continuation of long term problems, for example, homelessness, conflict with peers, and drug and/or illicit substance abuse issues. Five participants noted the support that they received from YSAS and other sectors.



**Q. Because several participants left school before Year 10, is it possible to introduce programs associated with transition to training and/or employment at an earlier stage?**

There was consensus and disappointment in the responses that the job pathways of the past no longer exist and this paradigm in turn may result in pro-criminal activities. SW1 reflected in his comments:

*We have lost an industry... the manufacturing industry is gone, the actual jobs that were there when we were young men are no longer there.*

There was also a touch of cynicism in the idea of ‘career planning’ as noted by SW2:

*There is no such thing in the current world as a career. You will have, what’s the average now, six to ten [jobs] in your lifetime... we need to change the conversation. Get some work ...because work is where you show up and there is a consequence if you don’t. The other consequence of showing up and working is a bit of cash.*

SW1 added to the conversation:

*And who is going to pay your rent?*

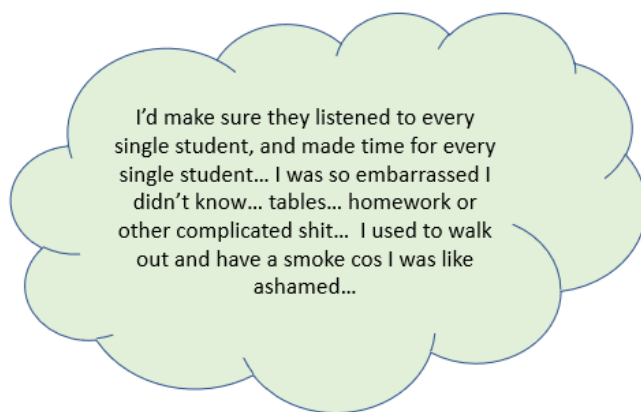
In this section the focus group members concluded that it is a different world now; the contextual nature of work and career has changed therefore we need to change the terminology and concept. If we fail to acknowledge this phenomenon then young, disenfranchised young men will continue to buck the establishment at society’s detriment.

### **Recommendations -attitudinal change**

Twenty-seven recommendations related to changes in staff attitude towards students. Participants requested that teachers are more understanding and empathetic of their individual situations, particularly in relation to learning difficulties and life situations.

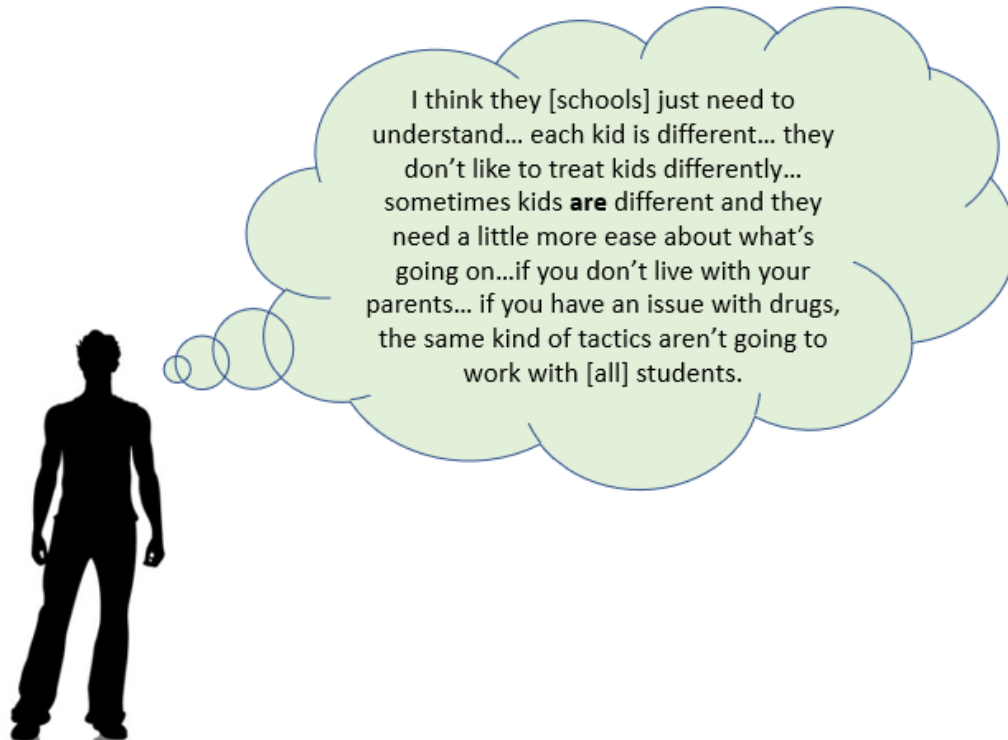


I stuffed up a little bit but then I've tried to change my ways but they [teachers] still acting towards me the same... I'm not quick at picking things up... it takes a bit of time.



I'd make sure they listened to every single student, and made time for every single student... I was so embarrassed I didn't know... tables... homework or other complicated shit... I used to walk out and have a smoke cos I was like ashamed...





**Q. Your ideas on what needs to occur to enable ‘at risk’ students to develop trust with teachers?**

There was a hint of hopelessness in T1’s reply to this question because teachers are seen by young people to be ‘the school’. Teachers are constrained by leaders within the school, the policy and procedures, and the departmental expectations:

*You are talking about what schools need to do and yet most of the kids are identifying the school as ‘teachers’.*

She then gave a case example of how young people do understand the situation:

*Having the kid with a hoody and the ear phones on and everybody else is like ...’how come we can’t do it...’? They get it, and what they get is that you are making accommodations for that young person...but you know ...try convincing your principal.*

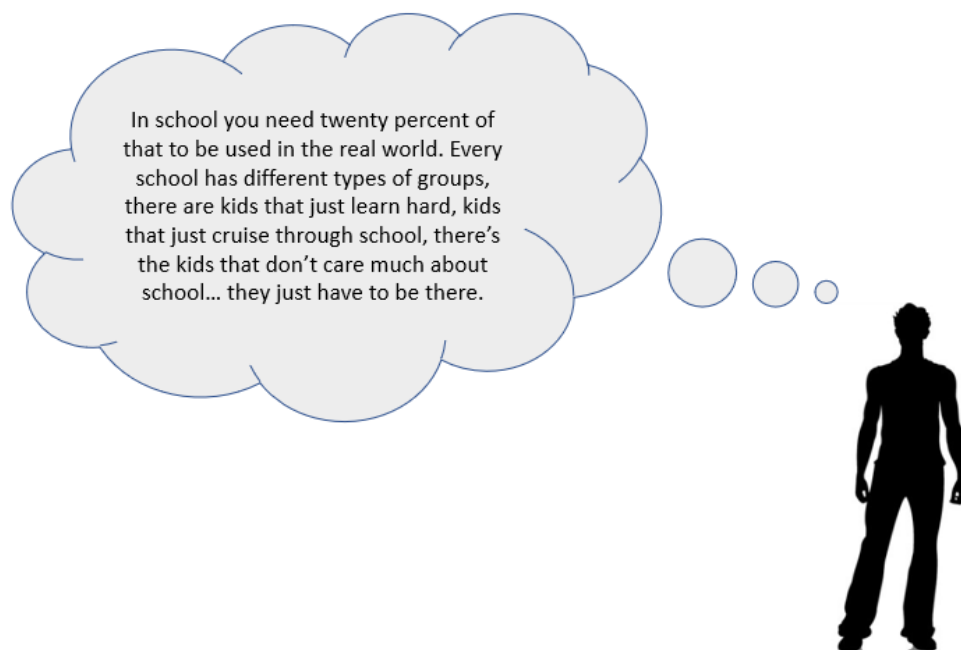
The need for ‘functioning’ students to step up and take a lead role in engaging their peers who are having difficulties was envisaged by SW2:

*What’s the go with the other young people in the class because young people are... really forgiving...really clever. I think [young people] want to be inclusive. [Other students are] not just a young person, this is someone they know who has a name and a life that they probably know a whole lot about. [Principals] have power that impacts on everyone.*

This section demonstrates the complex, hierarchical system a student sits within that can result in disempowerment and isolation. Thinking outside of the square in a creative manner is possibly what is needed to address problems within mainstream school.

### **Recommendations – tailored programs**

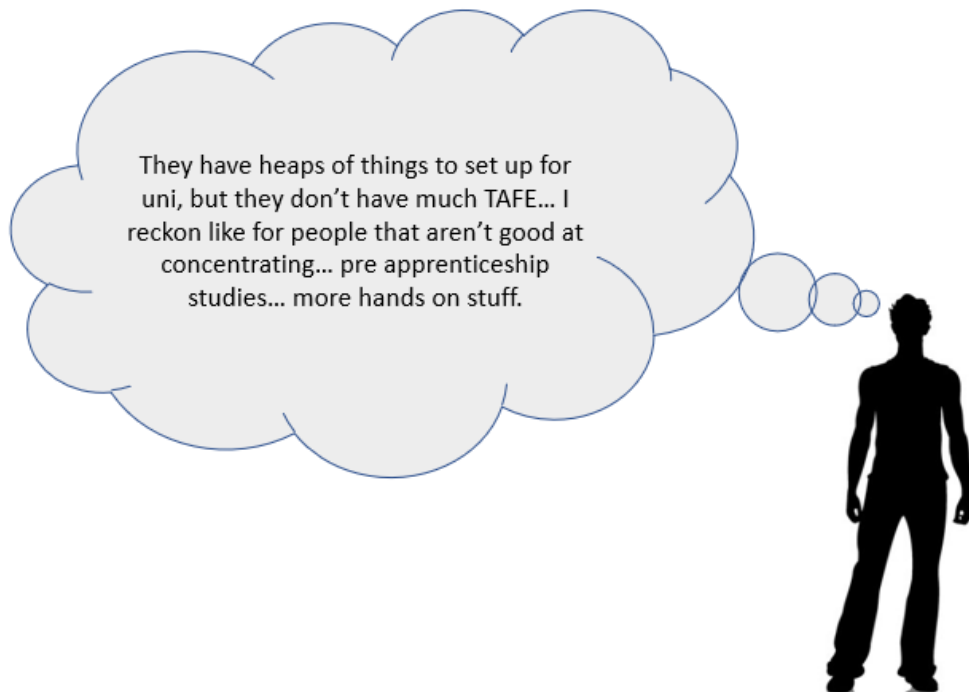
Fourteen participants recommended changes in this area. They would like the learning environment to be more entertaining and meaningful, with curriculum tailored individually to better enable transition to training and/or job opportunities.







I'd make it entertaining instead of sitting in class doing all this fucken algebra shit. Come up with compromising thing to work on outside instead of being all in the class.



They have heaps of things to set up for uni, but they don't have much TAFE... I reckon like for people that aren't good at concentrating... pre apprenticeship studies... more hands on stuff.

## **Q. Your ideas on what could be put in place?**

SW2 suggested that creativity in schools needs to be broader, across all programs, not just enmeshed within what is now known as ‘creative classes’, for example, art or drama:

*The creative bit of school is contained to those classes that are creative classes in school.*

T1 picked up on the need for stimulation and fun in the classroom:

*They want teachers to be fun!*

Schools are not babysitters as cited by SW2:

*Interesting stuff ...babysitting!*

The importance for parents to be involved; SW2 believes that this approach is especially relevant to resettlement families as a way of reinforcing both cultures, school and family:

*[For] many of the resettlement clients...school... that's the government's job! That's the school's job! So, you tend to not see the kind of level of engagement with parents...the parent /teacher stuff doesn't happen...parents being involved in the school reinforces both cultures, the home culture and the school culture. It defines the roles and responsibilities of both sides and somehow, I don't think that is what is occurring here.*

Finally, a realisation from the group members that the young men already have insight into their experiences of school, and the solutions required to address the gaps. SW2 reflected on the young men's comments with passion in his voice:

*Because there is so much in there [from the participants] of solution focused stuff and they are so insightful.*

## **Summary**

These findings are consistent with the young peoples' findings. The focus group has added depth, knowledge and learned understanding of what sits behind the face of education within a family-school mesosystem. Group members demonstrated an awareness and understanding of

the needs, gaps and challenges pertinent to the specific cultural needs of the young men involved in the study.

### **Second Focus Group in Geelong – setting the context**

As mentioned above, it was agreed that, given the relatively small numbers in the first focus group, a second focus group of three participants would be required to assist credibility and trustworthiness. The aim of the focus groups was to ‘clarify, extend, qualify or challenge data collected through other methods’ (Gill et al. 2008). While the ideal focus group is six to 10 participants, small groups can work successfully with as few as three (Bloor, Frankland & Robson 2001).

The second focus group was conducted in Geelong. A flyer was distributed to a special school in Geelong and a drug and alcohol service. Three participants expressed interest in being part of the focus group. Participants’ names have been changed to protect their identity. The focus group participants were: the facilitator (F), assistant facilitator (AF), a primary school teacher who is experienced in assessment of children and adolescents with learning disabilities (T2), a support worker (SW3) who is employed at a special school providing hands-on learning opportunities and experiences to support student pathways into further education, training and employment, and a drug and alcohol counsellor (AOD) with many years of experience in youth work.

The overall themes, questions, and young people’s comments are outlined above under each section.

### **How the young person experienced their school work and the educational environment, including any referrals for supplementary support.**

#### ***Language and / or learning difficulties***

There was a mixed response to this question that related to the member’s unique profession and experiences of work. T2 was not surprised at the young people’s comments. She emphasised that literacy is the core of all learning and that resultant disadvantage will occur if basic literacy is not in place:

*It doesn't surprise me ... if they have trouble reading they are disadvantaged in all subjects...maths is now language based so if maths was something they could get away with if they couldn't read [now] you are very disadvantaged.*

SW3 reflected on the need for schools to adopt 'hands on' learning for some students. He expressed regret that the jobs available in the past are no longer available:

*Unfortunately, the industry of manufacturing has declined so low skill labour now is almost a thing of the past.*

AOD reported on the disillusionment, frustration and complacency that she sees in young people who are disconnected from school:

*I think when they get to an older age, they get to a point when they don't want the help. I know myself from working with young males who can't read or write... from 15 and up [they] don't want to go off and do extra curricula or more because they feel judged already. They have already learned how to use their skills in other ways which is always good. Their perception is it is ABCD...so they just zone out.*

The frustration around language and/or learning difficulties that some young participants experienced, and their difficult pathway into employment, was mirrored in the comments from the focus group members.

### ***Bullying***

All three focus group members agreed that bullying in schools is a problem and additionally that young people are unwilling to report the bullying to teachers because they do not want to 'dob' and furthermore are fearful of the consequences. AOD commented:

*They will discuss it, but they are not willing to discuss it at school because they see it more as 'dobbing' and they will cop more because they are seen as 'dobbing' ... they are not willing to go to the teachers.*

T2 concurred and added that some children with learning disabilities are targeted and the bullying is often hidden from teachers:

*Very similar, but there is a lot of underhand bullying that teachers can't actually see ... if the children don't talk about it, it's only what you observe when you are out there and in the classroom...but if you are struggling with your language skills then – yes you will be picked on by other children unfortunately.*

SW3 agreed then he took a different slant. He discussed some incidents in which the victim reported being bullied as an avoidance tactic:

*He reports the bullying as a way of getting out and not having to go back to the place [school].*

The findings confirm that bullying in schools is a problem and that there are limited avenues for young people to disclose incidents due to an undercurrent of fear. Disclosure will often occur in sessions with other services out of the school environment.

### ***Externalised behaviour***

All members agreed that the young men's frustration and anger is a distraction that deflects from the task at hand. SW3 saw it as a way of staying in control:

*It's - 'I'm in control of you'. They will switch a light off, or turn it on, or break something...cause a bit of disturbance because then they are creating that ...and they feel like they are in control of organising that chaos...they like that chaos because it then deflects away from them having to sit in a classroom.*

AOD envisaged the behaviour as learned and reinforced:

*I think we know it is a learned behaviour ...they learn to do that and gain that reaction.*

T2 saw the behaviour as a distraction or deflection that masks underlying learning gaps:

*The need to save face in a 'macho' society...perhaps you are not doing as well as you could, behaviour is like a distraction, like a deflection...if they do this then they won't notice the underlying... the macho thing is very important to young males.*

What lies beyond the externalised behaviour drove the responses in this segment, the behaviour was a distraction or deflection to save face, and was therefore reinforced.

**Student /teacher relationships:**

The members' comments reflected those of the participants in that teachers sit on a continuum from interested and exceptional to disinterested and judgmental. SW3 relayed his experience of work in a special school:

*I have worked with sensational staff, teaching staff, worked with some that have struggled to invest in the students, in so far as taking an interest in them. The ones that have invested a bit of time into their wellbeing and stuff ...you see the kids really connect with them, and they really do try their best with those teachers.*

He noted also the cultural expectations of some families:

*There are probably 10 kids in the home environment, so the expectation is – go to school ...get back here and look after the kids.*

AOD identified the low skill base of many students, especially in relation to interpersonal interaction with teachers:

*I am assuming that he does not have those skills that will help him negotiate to leave the room.*

The absence of living and social skills was also noted with parents. SW3 commented:

*Sometimes the parents don't know any better, they are doing the best that they can do ...and the language as well... one expectation of the parent is, if they can sign their name then they can sign their Centrelink forms.*

As a teacher, T2 summed up this section:

*If you actually talk with them and be with them ...let them know that you are interested in them, then you will get far more out of them.*

While the role of the teacher, and additionally what the teacher brings to the student/teacher relationship is crucial, other variables such as family culture and function influence this process.

### **Conflict and/or violence, and alcohol and/or drug use in the family home**

There was consensus from the members that mainstream school does not have enough information about what is going on in the homes of these young people or awareness that these family problems reflected cultural diversity.

T2 identified this as a problem and suggested that there be more social interaction:

*Can I just say that in mainstream schools I don't know that there is enough information about the home life... in main stream schools there could be more social type interaction... you really can't underestimate the effect that being in a war-torn country can have on the family and the child. They have issues that we can't even think about.*

AOD saw the need for additional, upskilled, accessible resources in the wellbeing domain:

*I think one of the things that we see happening is that the young person will go to the wellbeing worker, or the teacher, who will say, 'go to the wellbeing worker'. If they are out then it's lost, it's not followed up on what's happened to that young person. I think wellbeing workers needs more support and [to be] upskilled a bit more, particularly around substance and mental health would help.*

SW3 agreed with this comment:

*I think all schools probably need more wellbeing officers.... our wellbeing officers are sensational, but they are under the pump.*

All focus group members agreed that with some families, particularly those from countries at war or a culture of violence, that the violence is often normalised.

The complexities of many young peoples' home life, and how these culturally based variables influence a young person's ability to sustain education was noted by the focus group members. Recommendations about how to address this issue was also discussed.

### **Co-offending and negative peer influence**

The message in this section reflected an awareness that if young males are failing in mainstream schooling and there is limited positive reinforcement, they will look to peers to enhance their sense of identity and comradeship.

AOD took this one step further when discussing the family dynamic:

*I notice that very often the families mix as well ...so [youth peer involvement] quite often, it's validated. Jonnie's mum and dad might be friends with Freddie's mum and dad. That's why they are all out together, leading by example ...transgenerational.*

T2 agreed:

*If they all do something together then they are raised up in estimation ...they've got very low self-esteem, and this might give them some cudos.*

The ethos of connection to a peer group to enhance identity and a sense of belonging, and how that influences teaching staff was mirrored in the comments from T3:

*So, it's tough, it's really tough to hear, but you think you are trying to help. There is that undercurrent of peer pressure and it's that peer pressure that brings them into crime unfortunately.*

T2 noted the easy access to peers via social media:

*When the children talk they are often on the social media...all hours of the morning, and so anything can come of that...they have a whole new set of friends... and they can be led off into all sort of other areas that really, neither parent knows much about.*

The variables that influence negative peer association are succinctly summed up in this section with an emphasis on identity and status. The views were reflected in the participants' comments.



### **Post-school experiences**

All members agreed that with mainstream schools, the focus and policy centres largely on academia and entry into higher education. Young males with ‘hands on’ skills tend to get lost in the system. Technical schools of the past are no longer available. SW3 stated:

*I think the policies stop that... [introduce programs associated with transition to training and/or employment at an earlier stage] ... I probably think that there are not enough pathways for mainstream kids.*

T2 and AOD agreed with this summation. The need for programs to be meaningful for young people was also tabled by SW3:

*To get into a program that is meaningful and engaging and where they feel that they are contributing as well.*

T2 envisaged this as:

*The old tech schools.*

AOD touched on the lack of support and young people who feel lost in the system:

*I think what's happening is that there is no linking of supports for those young people...they are focusing on the other ones ....so they just get lost [in the system].*

This section revealed a sense of hopelessness for young males who are not interested in, lack academic ability, and therefore require ‘hands on’ pathways that were available in the past via technical colleges.

### **Police involvement**

The focus group members reported a balanced approach to police involvement with ‘at risk’ young males. There is a belief that times have changed, that there is less respect for police and that this ethos is mirrored in the parents’ beliefs and values.

T2’s experience of the police who attend the school was positive:

*Any time I've seen police arrive they seem to be very reasonable.*

SW3 agreed, commenting on the police schools program and the need for more funding:

*There definitely needs to be more funding. That police in school's program was sensational ...however I also think there needs to be more respect shown to the police. I think that [disrespect of police is] shown by the parents ...you know 'f.... pigs' and whatever...why would you say that... they are not bad people...they are good people just doing ...that is their job.*

AOD agreed that the parent/child perception of the police can be negatively influenced by police attending the home:

*I wonder to if so often young people have so many negative experiences with them in their own life...they might be coming to the home because mum and dad are fighting...those sorts of experiences as opposed to positive interactions with police...quite often when dad is getting carted away.*

SW3 concurred:

*They copy the language of the parents.*

T2 reflected on the need for young males to protect identity through expression of bravado:

*When you were reading out that first one [young person's comment] ...I could just feel ...I could see attitude and sometimes it's just the bravado that they have...especially if their mates are around ...they are not going to say, 'oh good day constable, how are you?' They are going to be ...you know ...be smart...and I could feel that attitude in the first one.*

The discussion led into peer association. T3 commented:

*I always say that at school 'you get associated with the peers that you hang around with...if you hang around with the tools, you are going to be classified as a tool...if you hang around with the good kids, you will be classified as one of the good kids...it's up to you...make a choice.*

Identity was at the core of behaviour as expressed by AOD:

*And again, I think it is a little bit of a badge of honour for some groups. If you stand up to the policeman or in fact you are carted off in the car...that's a ...you know ...it's a cool thing.*

There was group consensus that there has been a recent shift in the attitude of young males. SW3 summed this up:

*I think if you look at it these days ...if you went to a party, [and] police would come to the party, a year ago everyone would disperse. These days they all congregate, and they start chucking things at them [the police].*

While the relationship with young 'at risk' males and the police has always been considered tenuous, focus group members noted a continuing downward spiral in young males' attitude and lack of respect. The Geelong focus group was more critical of the participants than the Dandenong focus group. This result may have reflected the cultural demographic.

### **Recommendations - attitudinal change**

Members concurred that administrative requirements, and the core work of mainstream schools, did not allow for programs that targeted 'at risk' students with specific needs. The conversation was directed to specialist schools in the community that could cater to their needs.

SW3 drew on his knowledge of one school:

*An hour of English, an hour of maths, four hours of sport, and the young men come out of that program feeling good about themselves, toned and they start off...if they can't read they will start off at level one basic A, B, Cs and they work them for two years.... more schools like that would be sensational'.*

T2 agreed and named another specialist school that provided 'hands on', experiential learning for students. She believes that boys learn differently to girls:

*One thing that I've always thought is that the education system fails boys, it starts off from preps really...boys have different learning abilities...my thought is always there is too much intellect, not whole-body stuff.*

Young peoples' recommendation in relation to teachers' attitudinal change was seen in a broader, whole of school context by the focus group members. There was general agreement that mainstream schools are not meeting the needs of many young males and this in turn is negatively influencing the student /teacher relationship.

### **Recommendations – tailored programs**

The findings in this section were reflective of the above section, that is, the need for more support and funding for programs such as mentoring. Because some parents are absent and unsupportive of the young person, a systemic, holistic approach is needed.

SW3 commented on the need for schools to be flexible:

*It has been a lot of hard work to get them [schools] to change, to be accepting and give more opportunities to traineeships and the like, and more work experience.*

AOD agreed about the need for flexibility and awareness that the parents may not be available:

*Thinking about VCAL, they have that afterhours and some of the appointments are later. There will be young people just on their own without their parents when its set up for them to have their parents go with them to find out what books they need to purchase, what subjects that are doing. I always think for that young person, if their parents are not going to find those things out, they [young people] have no backup, no supports.*

T2 empathised with the participant:

*With that child [participant comment], you could feel he had no support from home.*

Both focus groups commented on the insightfulness and perception of the participants; the need for a holistic approach to education.

## **Chapter summary**

In line with the previous focus group, the outcomes from this focus group are consistent with the findings of the participants. The one point of difference was that the Geelong focus group was more critical of the participants in their dealings with the police, what they saw as a perceived lack of respect for the police. In questioning the reason behind this finding two scenarios are possible. The first - the lived teaching experience in Geelong differed to the Dandenong group in that the students they work with are primarily an Anglo- Australian cohort. The second – empathy and understanding from the Dandenong focus group towards the African and Maori Pacific Islander young men involved in the study who felt harassed by the police in that area.

Chapter Seven discusses the findings presented in Chapter Five and Six and subsequently relates this information to the identified literature. Considerations of how the findings are useful to policy and practice will also be discussed.

## **CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION**

### **Sections 1-6**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

Chapter Seven explores the study's findings and is presented in six sections. Section 1 introduces the chapter. Section 2 overviews the themes that emerged from the participant interviews. Section 3 identifies each theme, whether the theme was supported by the focus group discussion, and whether the findings are consistent with previous research in this area. The findings cover the young men's overall experience of the classroom and school grounds, including their relationships with school staff. Variables outside of the school setting that may have compounded or contributed to pro-criminal behavioural and attitudinal change are investigated. These variables include: peer relationships outside of the school setting; alcohol and/or substance use; the role of family and neighbourhood within a family-school mesosystem; entry into pro-criminal behaviour and post school experiences, including the impact of early school leaving. Section 4 covers themes that produced new findings and therefore require additional research. Section 5 discusses the implications for policy and practice. Section 6 covers the study's strengths and limitations.

#### **Restating the aim of the study**

The aim of this qualitative research study was to explore the lived school experiences of young males aged 16 to 21, and how these experiences may have influenced a trajectory into pro-criminal behaviour. Past and current literature primarily suggests that the young person's opinion is generally not sought. By listening to their voices, and engaging in the discourse, their stories and experiences can hopefully lead to a better understanding of their situation which may in turn have implications for policy and practice. Focus groups with adult representatives from schools and youth services were conducted following the interviews to comment on the findings and assist credibility.

The following questions formed the basis of the research:

**From young male offenders' perspectives, how do school experiences relate to offending behaviour?**

In answering this research question five specific research questions are noted:

**What was the young person's experience of their school work and educational environment and were there referrals for supplementary support?**

**What were the young person's issues pertaining to family and the home and surrounding environment, and how this interacted with their schooling?**

**What problems related to the onset of offending behaviour and/or peer involvement, including suspension or expulsion from school?**

**What were the post-school experiences for the young person; did early school leaving influence a trajectory into crime?**

**Would the addition of a focus group to comment on the findings, involving representatives from schools, justice and young services, assist credibility?**

### **How the method worked in practice**

Little is known about young offenders' perception of school and how that may influence a trajectory into crime (Hopkins, Clegg & Stackhouse 2016). There is an absence of published studies about young offenders' perceptions relative to their experiences of school. This belief that young offenders' voices are absent in the literature is supported by previous research (Barnert et al. 2015; Ashkar & Kenny 2009)). Overall, the current study findings indicate that for these young men, despite educational gaps and for some low language ability (Snow & Powell 2005), they could reflect on the questions and display insight into the difficulties experienced at school. Furthermore, their solution focused recommendations, that if initiated may have altered a pathway to crime, were noted by the author and the focus group members. Semi-structured individual interviews conducted in an emotionally safe and confidential place is likely to have assisted the collection of this rich, qualitative data. Trust and respect in discourse aids positive communication (Hopkins, Clegg & Stackhouse 2016).

The findings draw on qualitative data gathered for the study from semi-structured interviews with the participants. The data enables the researcher to gain an understanding of what participants tell us about their social world and lived experiences. While the procedure of data collection, analysis and writing may appear to be sequential, in qualitative research the process is inseparable, and as suggested by Silverman (2013, p.15) 'you can be pushed and pulled by various sources'. Data from the participant interviews was compared with existing literature to explore the phenomenon and theoretical underpinnings. Silverman (2013, p. 24) proposes that 'theory makes sense of the data'. The interview location can generate for the researcher a good deal more than the content of the interview and observation can add to the rich and informative data already gleaned in the interview (Elwood & Martin 2000).

The researcher also drew on elements or steps from Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological descriptive methodology (Englander 2012; Giorgi 2012; Shosha 2012). These steps were utilised as follows:



1. The researcher met with the participants prior to the actual interview to review ethical considerations, complete consent forms and defuse the engagement process.
2. The researcher recorded and transcribed the data being mindful of the subject-subject relation and the subject-phenomenon relationship. Throughout this process, the researcher had an open mind to the revelation of new nuances that may challenge known perceptions of the phenomenon.
3. Each transcript was read and re-read to gain a general sense of the content.
4. Significant statements that pertain to the phenomenon were extracted and recorded.
5. Meanings were formulated from these statements.
6. Meanings were sorted into categories, clusters of themes, and themes. This included a cultural stream due to the varied ethnicity of the participant group.
7. The findings were integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study.
8. The fundamental structure of the phenomenon was described.
9. The final step recommended validation of the findings sought from the participants to compare the researcher's findings with their experiences. However, this step was not included in the process due to the transient nature of the participant group over a significant time period.

The phenomenological paradigm calls on the researcher to work inductively with the data by focusing on meanings. As argued by Silverman (2013, p.31), 'step back in order to take a closer look'.

Once the above process was completed, the themes were presented to the focus groups for input and discussion.

## **7.2 Themes that emerged from the study**

By exploring how school experiences relate to offending behaviour from the perspective of young male offenders, the following eleven themes under predetermined categories were identified.

There was a mixed and varied response to the young men's experiences of school (class room and school grounds). Most reported difficulties and that the experience was primarily negative.

Five young men experienced *language and/or learning difficulties that led to embarrassment and frustration*. Six young men had *the experience of being bullied both* within and outside of the school grounds. For two young men, the bullying was underpinned by racism. When the young men felt disconnected from mainstream education *externalised behaviour – anger, bullying others, and fights underpinned initially by embarrassment* occurred. Regarding student /teacher relationships it was found that *African young offenders reported positive relationships with teachers* and *non-African youth had mostly poor relationships with teachers*. A theme associated with externalised behavioural problems, identity verses role confusion, found that school *difficulties resulted in identity problems*. *A sense of belonging was found in peer relationships*. Coupled with this phenomenon was the use of *alcohol and/or illicit substances*. Further issues that compounded the young men's ability to connect to education was an *adverse family environment* - all participants except for one came from broken homes. Family problems included, conflict in the family home followed by reported alcohol and/or drug use and for five participants entrenched family violence. *The migrant/refugee experience: young men, schools and families* was identified as a strong theme related to the experiences of Maori Pacific Islander and African participants. An additional complication was *African youth and the role of respect in police involvement*. Finally, the post school discussion found that *early school leaving resulted in a continuation of 'at risk' behaviour*.

### **Participants overall experience of school (class room and school grounds)**

As mentioned above, there was a mixed and varied response to the young men's experiences of school. Most reported difficulties and that the experience was primarily negative. The overriding themes associated with the negativity included - learning difficulties that led to frustration and embarrassment, compounded by the experience of being bullied by other students. This in turn resulted in externalised behavioural problems - anger, bullying others and fights.

### ***Language and or learning difficulties that led to embarrassment and frustration***

Participants' language and/or learning difficulties led to frustration and embarrassment in the classroom. Learning difficulties were clearly related to contextual factors, for example, neurological disorders, poor comprehension, boredom, ambivalence, feeling isolated, bullied, excluded and alone in the classroom due to feeling shy and nervous. The focus group provided

another level of credibility to the findings. The focus group participants agreed that learning difficulties were a real issue for many children, particularly those who were disengaged from school. The group recommended that consideration be given to the early identification of language and/or learning difficulties and, additionally, that the style of learning is consistent with a young person's presentation and underlying needs, for example, difficulties associated with the refugee population with whom they work.

These findings are consistent with the literature which suggests that reading, language and learning disabilities may result in disrupted education and a pathway to pro-criminal behaviour (Snow et al. 2015; Mallett 2014; Snow & Powell 2008; Elbeheri, Everatt & Malki 2008; Selenius et al. 2006; Snowling 2008). An Australian study that examined 16 incarcerated young adolescent offenders' perceptions of school (Ashkar & Kenny 2009, p. 363) identified that the participants 'felt disconnected [and] feared embarrassment and humiliation in front of their peers'. Alexander-Passe (2006, p. 260) argues that children with learning difficulties have reported feeling 'disappointed, frustrated, ashamed, fed up, sad, depressed, angry and embarrassed'.

It seems clear from this study, comments from the focus group members, and a substantial body of literature that there is an established link between language and learning difficulties resulting in disrupted education and a trajectory to pro-criminal behaviour.

### ***The experience of being bullied***

Several young men experienced being teased and bullied, at times due to learning and/or language difficulties. For two participants, their sense of belonging and fitting into a learning environment was hampered by racism.

Focus group members agreed that bullying is an ongoing phenomenon in schools, and has '*far-reaching consequences*'. Disclosure of bullying, and the complexities teachers faced when this occurred, was problematic and '*operates on so many levels*'. At a student level, personal safety risks were associated with 'dobbing'. At a teacher level, reporting was associated with a paper work trail, and at a higher level, the possibility of mandatory reporting requirements. Focus group members agreed that the phenomenon was often hidden from teachers.

The current study is consistent with limited previous research in which the prevalence of bullying in the school setting is recognised as a significant risk factor for academic performance and sustainability (Barnert et al. 2015; Cornell et al. 2013; Ashkar & Kenny 2009). All three studies conducted interviews with adolescents, two with adolescent offenders, and all commented on the shortage of qualitative research in which young people are given a voice. The focus of two studies with incarcerated adolescent offenders, one undertaken in Australia (Ashkar & Kenny 2009), indicated that 14 of the 16 male participants were victims. The other US study (Barnert et al. 2015, p.1366), on incarcerated youth, reported that ‘schools felt unsafe because of gang activity and bullying’. Several participants in the study reported that the option of going to jail was easier than staying at school due to the bullying and gang activity. Another US prospective study that focused specifically on teasing and bullying in high school, and how the phenomena may influence school dropout (Cornell et al. 2013, p.147), found that ‘bullying at high school is a noteworthy problem’, however, the focus should not be only on the individual but also include the ‘broader peer and school influences’.

This study’s findings, when considered alongside previous research, concur that bullying in schools is a problem and that there are limited avenues for young people to disclose incidents due to an undercurrent of fear. Disclosure will often occur in sessions with other services out of the school environment. Stressors related to learning difficulties and peer victimisation placed young people on a downward spiral leading to sadness, despondency, acting out behaviour and eventually giving up. Based on this study and previous findings, there is an argument for further qualitative research that allows for young people to express their lived experiences of bullying and how the phenomenon can be brought to the teachers’ attention.

### ***Externalised behaviour – anger, bullying others, and fights underpinned initially by embarrassment***

The current study found that when failure and despondency at school appeared inevitable for several young men, externalised behavioural problems emerged. The problem behaviour would present in various forms such as anger, bullying others and fights. For some young men,

behavioural problems were evident in early primary school and, over time, resulted in truancy, suspensions and expulsions.

Focus group members reflected on their experiences of externalised behavioural problems in the classroom. They suggested that the young men's frustration and anger is a distraction that deflects from the task at hand, a way of staying in control. Additionally, the behaviour reinforced the need to save face in a perceived 'macho society' and was therefore reinforced.

Few previous studies lend support to the current research findings and, like this study, Ashkar & Kenny's (2009) research found that, while participants may have felt an initial desire to achieve, this desire can be surpassed by frustration, anger, hopelessness, and disappointment once failure occurs. For low achievers with poor self-esteem, literacy problems are exacerbated by feelings of embarrassment and further compounded by the need for social approval from peers (Newman 2002). Eventually embarrassment is overridden by externalised behaviour in and out of the classroom. Additional research suggests that negative association with peers, and a belief that teachers had given up, resulted in 'acting out' and externalised behaviour problems (Barnert et al. 2015).

This section of the current study reinforces the theoretical construct of strain theory, that is, successful adjustment to school is reliant upon both academic and social competence. However, children who experience learning difficulties are subject to strain involving negative emotions such as fear, depression and anger. When this occurs, there is an increased likelihood of young people adopting antisocial behaviour (Lowe, May & Elrod 2008).

The current study highlights the need for more research around teachers' awareness of what is occurring when 'at risk' students are not coping, and feel embarrassed about asking for help, especially in front of peers. When a sense of hopelessness permeates, embarrassment may be overridden by 'acting out' or externalised behaviour. Limited studies touch on this area, strategies to address the issue, and ways that children can be given a voice and opportunity to express these concerns.

### **Student/teacher relationships**

The current study found that the young men's relationships with teachers varied. Seven participants reported a positive, supportive relationship with several teachers, notably, six of the seven participants who felt supported were of African background. A further six participants reported some teachers were supportive and other teachers unsupportive, two participants reported support from individual teachers (including one cultural teacher); and five participants felt generally unsupported.

### ***African young offenders reported positive relationships with teachers***

All but one of the young men of African descent felt supported by their teachers. The remaining African young man reported that he failed to engage with the support offered. Those who felt supported could identify several factors that enhanced the student/teacher relationship, for example, one-on-one support; a teacher who would stay back after school to have a 'chat' and enquire about what was happening at home and life in general; the relaxed persona of the teacher; humour; and a perceived understanding of cultural and familial difficulties. One young man appreciated the support and direction provided by a teacher from his own cultural background.

The focus group members' comments reflected those of the participants, with regard to teachers sitting on a continuum from interested and exceptional to disinterested and judgmental. One member from Dandenong offered insight into why all but one of the African participants cited a positive relationship with their teachers. He found that, within the African culture, respect is at the core of relationships and that young African men do not respond well to an authoritarian or 'speaking down to' style of interaction. On the other hand, four of the seven young African offenders reported a negative involvement with the police.

There are limited studies that have examined the 'cultural, racial, and background differences' that influence the quality of student-teacher relationships and whether these relationships can support and protect marginalised young people (Davis 2003, p. 224). A recent Australian exploratory study (Horyniak et al. 2017) that researched the role of respect in the interactions of young substance users and the police, found that respect, as a value, is highly regarded by the African community. Two aspects of respect – human respect and status respect (community elders and men as leaders) are considered highly relevant and important. This paradigm is born

out of environments that lack resources and approval from external sources (Horyniak et al. 2017, p.4).

This study found that nearly all young men of African background reported positive relationships with teachers. This was possibly explained by one focus group member who, from experience, found that respect is culturally important in interactions with others, especially those in authority.

### ***Non-African youth had poor relationships with teachers***

The young men who experienced difficult relationships with teachers could identify several issues that impinged the relationships. These included: comments of a judgmental nature that triggered anger; a perceived lack of individual support when needed; a belief that they were being victimised, judged and dismissed; and disparaging comments related to family.

Focus group members concurred on the need for teachers to adopt prosocial interactions and strategies with ‘at risk’ students. They added that relationship bonding is more likely to occur in primary school at which time ‘nurturing’ is more likely to occur whereas, in secondary school, teachers have a more specialist role. They also identified that negative experiences will ‘stick in kid’s minds’ and can therefore make or break the relationship. The group discussed the broader difficulties that teachers face within the educational, structural and cultural milieu of schools, including the low social skill base of many students, a reflection of social difficulties and learning within the home.

The literature supports a successful transition to school, and the importance of teacher/student relationships within that context. A national prospective study involving 910 children, aged 5-6 years (Hamre & Pianta, 2005), found that ‘at risk’ children with less emotional support had strained relationships with teachers. The study is supported by Baker et al. (2008, p. 3) which found that children who have difficulties in the first years at school perform to a lesser degree on ‘...academic, social and interpersonal indicators of school adjustment...’.

When defining ‘relationships’ from a social work ethos (Compton, Galaway & Cournoyer, 2005), it is acknowledged that there are elements of power and control within the dynamic that can influence adjustment between the person and their environment.

### **School difficulties resulted in identity problems: a sense of belonging was found in peer relationships**

This study's findings indicate that when the young men felt frustration, embarrassment, isolation and disconnection with mainstream education, the need to form an identity resulted in alliance with peers experiencing similar problems. Peer relationships, however, were mainly negative with only two participants reporting a positive association. Enmeshed within, and underpinning a negative peer culture, was bullying, conflict, fights and alcohol and/or illicit substance use. For one young man kinship underpinned the peer conflict. Membership with the peer group provided status, a sense of identity, and additionally, a pathway into crime. Criminal involvement varied. Examples included: aligning with and supporting peers of a similar cultural background when an incident occurred; being led by other peers into offending behaviour; peer involvement in property damage (graffiti); and mutual involvement with illicit drugs. Two participants who reported a positive connection with peers portrayed a belief in themselves and a sense of confidence. They continued at school until Year 11 and 12. There was a belief that mutual support underpinned the relationship. The focus group members reflected on the environment in schools and how young people may be feeling overwhelmed and isolated within this environment. They suggested that connection with a negative peer group in some ways was an escape, an emotional safety buffer.

This study is consistent with previous research which identifies a strong relationship between peer group association and entry into pro-criminal behaviour (Murray & Farrington 2010; Staff & Kreager 2008; Steinberg & Monahan 2007). What is also known is that the link is stronger in males, the target group for this study, as opposed to females (Lowe, May & Elrod 2008) and is influential both within and outside of the school setting. This factor is likely to contribute to the disproportionately high number of males who are involved in criminal behaviour.

The influence of antisocial peers correlates strongly with a trajectory into criminal behaviour. A review of longitudinal, large sample studies related to family and social risk factors for conduct disorder and delinquency for young people aged 10 to 17 years (Murray & Farrington 2010), found that several factors including low verbal IQ, school failure and delinquent peers correlated with pro-criminal behaviour.



This study's findings, including comments from the focus group members, and a substantial body of literature, identify the link between identity formation and bonding with peers of a similar attitudinal and behavioural stance. What follows can be a trajectory into criminal attitude and behaviour.

### **Alcohol and/or illicit substances**

All 20 participants reported the use of alcohol and/or illicit substances. One young male was eight years of age when he commenced cannabis. Two participants reported alcohol use from 11 years of age and seven from the age of 12-13. The data indicates that alcohol and/or illicit substance use is clear as a trend, that for several young males the use commenced at a young age, and within various contexts. Cannabis and alcohol were the preferred substance, two reported ICE use and one heroin use. The theme covers several domains, both within and outside of the school environment and additionally, as seen in the next section, within a family context. The focus group concurred that if young people feel overwhelmed or lost in the school system they will naturally turn to a similar peer group for support and affiliation and alcohol and/or illicit substance use compounds the problem.

This study's findings support previous research that identifies a clear relationship between illicit substance use in adolescence and subsequent adjustment difficulties. Poor school attendance, decreased academic motivation and achievement, impaired cognition and functioning, health problems and pro-criminal behaviour (Ashkar & Kenny 2009; Flory et al. 2004; Chassin, Pitts & Prost 2002) (see Figure 4 below). The onset of alcohol use at a young age parallels with key findings from a 2009 NSW health survey of young people in custody in which 13 was the average age of their first alcoholic drink. A parallel was also seen in the preferred use of cannabis.



**Figure 4 - Relationship between illicit substance abuse and other factors**

While there is substantial debate about whether substance abuse results in pro-criminal behaviour or pro-criminal behaviour leads to substance abuse, studies indicate that the two are interrelated (Briere et al. 2014; Hart et al. 2007). Loss/grief and emotional dysregulation were also precursors to alcohol use in the current study in which two participants were dealing with loss of family and friends. The findings are supported by previous research which found that comorbid psychiatric illness among juvenile offenders is high (Fazel et al. 2008). The current findings also support previous research that identifies a clear relationship between illicit substance use in adolescence and subsequent adjustment difficulties.

## **Family life and the home and surrounding environment**

### ***Adverse family environment***

The current study found that only one of the 20 participant's parents were living together. Nevertheless, 13 participants reported that they could get support from family. There were three overriding themes in this section with the predominant theme 'conflict in the family home', as reported by 10 of the 20 participants. Five participants reported family violence, and five participants reported family alcohol and/or drug use. Eight participants reported DHHS involvement. One participant described the situation at home as 'mayhem'. He transitioned between both parents and spent many years in residential care as mandated by DHHS. There was consensus from focus group members that education is generally valued by families. However, several socioeconomic challenges of a broad and specific nature can influence children's pathways and outcomes.

Focus group members identified several areas where schools could improve outcomes for young people. This includes:

- School staff to be more aware of the lived home experiences of young people and how socioeconomic conditions can negatively influence their learning;
- Wellbeing officers to be trained to undertake student assessments within a biopsychosocial context;
- Additional wellbeing officers to be employed;
- For those students who are not coping academically, access to 'hands on' TAFE orientated activities.

The literature supports the notion that children exposed to dysfunctional, violent and anti-social behaviour within the home environment, as evidenced in the current study, are likely to model this behaviour in their interactions at school. Behavioural theorists, such as Skinner (1938), proposed that behaviour (operant learning and conditioning) is contingent upon environmental consequences that either increase (reinforce) or decrease (punish) the frequency of behaviour. Operant learning is criticised by others (Bandura 1977; Bandura, Ross & Ross 1961) for ignoring

the cognitive processes that may be occurring. Albert Bandura (1977) expanded on the concept of operant learning and conditioning in his explanation of Social Learning Theory. He proposed that people learn by observing the actions of others (i.e., a role model). However, this is dependent upon the environmental consequences of reinforcement or punishment.

This study's findings are consistent with a body of research related to adjustment problems that may arise in early childhood associated with the core concepts of neurodevelopment and attachment theory (Perry 2009; De Bellis 2005), and emotional security theory (EST) (Sturge-Apple et al. 2008). Those children who come from a background of abuse and neglect, who were not afforded the opportunity to attach with a parent or carer, are likely to be severely disadvantaged and unable also to bond with the school system, both socially and academically.

The core concept of ecological systems theory sets the parameters in understanding the current findings from the perspective of - the microsystem (individual, family, peers); the mesosystem (family and schools); and exosystem (parental employment/unemployment); and macrosystem (broader culture of society) (Bronfenbrenner (1979). The entities, although separate, need to be seen and understood within the school system for positive change to occur. It can be concluded from the current study, and a broad body of literature, that adverse family environments significantly influence a young person's educational pathway. It is also established that problems may arise in early childhood.

### ***The migrant/refugee experience: young men, schools and families***

Commonalities emerged within the racially defined subgroups. For example, several participants from Maori/Pacific Islander background reported feeling embarrassed due to difficulties comprehending and understanding their school work and poor student/teacher relationships. The experience resulted in low motivation, boredom, ambivalence, acting out and externalised behaviour. The highest level achieved by these students was Year 11 and the lowest Year 8. In contrast, all but one participant from African background reported a good student/teacher relationship and most remained at school longer, with three reaching Year 12 and the lowest Year 10. Focus group members concurred that mainstream schools do not have enough information about what is going on in the homes of these young people especially in relation to

cultural difficulties. For example, the effect that being in a war-torn country, where violence is often normalised, can have on family and children.

An Australian survey study (Thomas & Kearney 2008) that investigated teachers' cultural understanding and confidence when working in culturally diverse classes, concurred with the current study, that students with a Pacific Island heritage performed below average academically in comparison to other cultural groups, including Maori. The current study grouped Maori and Pacific Islander participants. The researchers found that international studies out of the US, New Zealand, and data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) supported these findings. The survey results, in line with recommendations from the focus groups, found that there is a need for 'understandings of cultural diversity' to be included in professional standards for teachers (Thomas & Kearney 2008, p. 114).

An explanation of the above phenomenon is discussed using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The model 'examines how distinct layers of identity and human functioning interconnect (McBrien, 2011, p. 83). This US mixed methods study, involving resettled refugee mothers of Vietnamese, Somali, and Iranian background, found that with the Somalian families, teachers' opinions are highly respected despite difficulties trusting authority due to repressive governments in their homeland and 'in flight' stressors. Disciplining children saw a disparity between the corporal punishment allowed in their country of origin and Australian laws. This led to frustration and a perceived diminishing of parental authority. For those participants of African descent who had little or no contact with their fathers, the parental role rested with their mothers who were more likely to place a value on the importance of education (McBrien, 2011).

Because of Australia's growing culturally diverse population, further research is required on the unique and varied educational needs of students at risk of criminal behaviour within a cultural mesosystem context. Thomas and Kearney (2008, p.116) identified the limitations of their purely quantitative study thus recommending mixed methods research. The current study has captured the voice of these young men. More research is required on the unique commonalities and underlying cultural differences of the two groups identified in this study, Maori Pacific Islander and African background. The challenge is how educational and other departments, for example,

the justice system, can connect with and provide services that will sustain education and divert these young men from the criminal justice system.

### **Criminal involvement and the law**

Seven participants, four of African background, reported negative experiences in their dealings with the police. The onset of involvement with the police ranged from 12 years of age to 17 years of age; one participant reported that he was reprimanded by the police when he was eight years of age. Another participant reported criminal activity during school hours. He would go to school, then abscond and break into houses to steal money to buy cannabis, and return to school. The type of offences that these young people committed ranged from minor, for example theft, to offences that resulted in incarceration, for example affray.

### ***African youth and their perceived role of respect in police involvement***

The young men of African descent primarily felt that they were being unfairly targeted by the police; this in turn led to suspicion, lack of trust and consequently impacted their schooling. When these issues were explored further, some young men acknowledged that not all police officers and/or teams were ‘bad’. Group gatherings in shopping centres resulted in perceived police discrimination. Once in the higher end of the justice system, four participants reported that their involvement with youth justice was a supportive one, mostly welcomed. The current study clearly indicated that participants from Africa had positive student/teacher relationships and poor relationships with police.

These findings were supported by the experience of the Dandenong focus group members who work with this client group and found perceived profiling by police as a type of authority bullying. Focus group members’ recommendations about how to break down the barriers between young offenders and the police centred on ‘...*dealing with this organisational culture or the perception of it*’. Youth resource officers, police designated to work within schools, were highly regarded, nevertheless seen as different to other police officers. This inconsistency was envisaged by workers and young offenders as the core of the problem embodied in respect and trust difficulties. The issue of respect was perceived as mutual by participants from the Geelong focus group who, from their own recent experience, noticed a disrespect for police and that this ethos is mirrored in the parents’ beliefs and values.

A recent Australian qualitative study involving 18 refugee young African people who use alcohol and/or drugs (Horyniak et al. 2017, p.9), found that “*violations of human respect were a common cause of frustration and anger for participants... [and they] .... described police behaviour as ‘baiting’, ‘harassing’, ‘provoking’, and ‘getting in your face’*”. Horyniak et al. (2017) reported limited research in relation to the interactions between the police and young people from a refugee background. Furthermore, the study found that the same young people are often excluded from public discourse. The phenomenon of respect in the interaction between young people from an African refugee background and the police was examined by Horyniak et al. (2017). The study found that the young people felt disrespected by the police primarily due to the use of discriminatory language and failure to differentiate between individuals which resulted in a loss of identity.

The following research supports the above findings in relation to race minority groups. A US longitudinal study Farrington et al. (1996) found that race minority groups were over represented in police and court statistics. The study suggested three explanations, that is, police and courts may be demonstrating bias towards minority groups, minority groups were underrepresented in the survey, and variation across ethnic groups. More recent literature (Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) 2014; Johnson et al. 2009; Kjellstrand & Eddy 2011) comments on discrimination against racial minorities and the disparities in the processing and the decision making undertaken by the criminal justice system.

A collaborative approach involving school administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community groups, such as the police, is needed to address disorder, build trust and foster acceptance (Welsh 2001). The involvement of social workers as a discipline aligns strongly with the systematic, ecological approach required. The layers would include, the microsystem (young person/family/peers), the mesosystem (families/schools), the exosystem (other services/agencies including the police) and the macrosystem (cultural paradigm) (McBrien 2011).

This study found a small body of evidence that in Australia, young African people had an overwhelmingly negative relationship with the police and within that context, a perceived lack of respect from the police equates to racial profiling. Further research is required into this issue. A surprise finding in the current study is that the positive relationships with teachers were at odds

with the extremely negative relationships with the police. Respect, and how that equates culturally, seems to be the underlying reason.

### **Post school experiences**

The post school experiences of the young men involved in the current study varied. Nine participants were either enrolled in, or enrolment pending, in Technical and Further Education (TAFE), trade courses or apprenticeships. Three participants reported ambivalence and resistance to training, programs, and/or employment; three were critical of the school system because they believed that they were not given direction, and, for several, there was a continuation of 'at risk' behaviour.

### ***Early school leaving resulted in a continuation of 'at risk' behaviour***

For seven young men, there was a continuation of long term problems, for example, homelessness, conflict with peers, and drug and/or illicit substance abuse issues. Those who left school early were in this final group. They found support with YSAS. The user friendly, easily accessible, and suitably individualised programs offered by YSAS enabled the young men to connect with activities and programs that were enjoyable and suitable to their learning and interest needs.

Focus group members concurred that the job pathways of the past associated with the manufacturing industry no longer exist, and without the knowledge and skills to engage with tertiary education or other employment opportunities, these young men are often ill-equipped to enter the workforce without support. The focus group members concluded that it is a different world now; the contextual nature of work and career has changed. Past job opportunities, for example, jobs in the manufacturing industry, are diminishing. The findings are consistent with the literature (Ashkar & Kenny 2009; Halsey 2008). That is, poor academic performance can result in early school departure and impact significantly on an individual's future employment and life opportunities.

It is clear from the current findings, supported by the focus group members, and a body of literature, that 'at risk' young males who leave school early have limited training and job pathways. Further research is required around educational pathways that meet the specific needs



of this group and that enables engagement with education with a parallel lens on suitable job pathways.

### **Participants' recommendations**

The overriding concern for the young men involved in this study was what they perceived as the need for changes in the attitude of the teaching staff. This was followed by changes in the school curriculum and school surrounds, and finally some direction and implementation in relation to a career pathway and trade options.

When reflecting on their life course, several young men reported that, if systems, processes and communication lines were different, they may have remained within the education system. For some there was genuine regret that they had 'stuffed up' but also disappointment that they were exited so quickly without an opportunity to put their case forward.

### ***Attitudes of teaching staff***

Twenty-seven recommendations related to changes in staff attitude towards students. Participants involved in the study believed that:

- they were labelled and not given a second chance when incidents occurred;
- teachers lacked empathy and understanding of their unique circumstances, for example, learning difficulties and adverse home environments;
- teachers were not aware, or failed to acknowledge, the embarrassment and shame they felt when they did not understand, or could not finish, their school work;
- sometimes they needed one-on-one support from teachers away from the scrutiny of peers;
- teachers should not be so harsh, angry, aggressive, autocratic and favour certain students; and
- there is a need for teachers to be trained in mediation skills to deal with peer conflict.

Findings from broad studies conducted on learning difficulties including: dyslexia (Ashkar & Kenny 2009; Lowe, May & Elrod 2008; Shaywitz & Shaywitz 2008), family dysfunction (Winkworth & Mc Arthur 2008; Renzaho & Karantzas 2010; Brown et al. 2010; Murray & Farrington 2005), onset of criminal behaviour (Lipsey et al. 2010; Andrews et al. 1990; Trotter 2006), and social bonding (Trotter & Evans 2012; Andrews & Bonta 2010; Farrington 2007; Bonta & Andrews 2007) touch on the above recommendations identified by this study's participants that may address issues associated with the teacher/student relationships.

***Make school entertaining, meaningful and individually tailored for transition to the workforce***

Fourteen participants recommended that the learning environment be more entertaining and meaningful, with curriculum individually tailored to better enable transition to training and/or job opportunities.

This included:

- creative activities that are of interest to marginalised young people and conducted in and out of the classroom to alleviate boredom;
- activities and programs that 'make sense' in relation to future goals and aspirations;
- sports activities integrated into the school curriculum (rugby for Maori Pacific Islander background young people);
- the inclusion of social and political debate around authority figures and systems associated with young peoples' rights; and
- the employment of cultural mentors.

There was validation from the focus group members that the young men already have insight into their experiences of school, and the solutions required to address the gaps. One member reflected on the young men's comments with passion in his voice: '*...because there is **so** much in there of solution focused stuff and they are **so** insightful ...*'. What is absent and needed for these young people is that their voices need to be heard, acknowledged and validated. 'The greater failure about which educational systems should be concerned is the failure of schools to enable the democratic participation of the most excluded young people' (Black 2011, p. 470).

Central to the education argument is equality and opportunity for all students. When measured against other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (Schleicher & Zoido 2016, p.700), student resiliency in Australia was below the OECD average in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2012 data base. A review of global educational data identifies that the socioeconomic status of students and schools ‘exert a powerful influence on learning outcomes’ (Schleicher & Zoido 2016, p. 701).

## **Summary**

### **7.3 Summary confirming existing literature**

Four themes emerged in the current study that were supported by the results of previous research. The themes included:

#### ***Learning difficulties that led to embarrassment and frustration***

It seems clear from this study, comments from the focus group members, and a substantial body of literature that there is an established link between language and learning difficulties that resulted in disrupted education and a trajectory to pro-criminal behaviour.

#### ***School difficulties that resulted in identity problems: a sense of belonging was found in peer relationships***

This study’s findings, including comments from the focus group members, and a substantial body of literature, identifies the link between identity versus role confusion and bonding with peers of a similar nature. What follows can be a trajectory into criminal attitude and behaviour.

#### ***Alcohol and/or illicit substance use;***

The current findings support previous research that identifies a clear relationship between alcohol and/or illicit substance use in adolescence and subsequent adjustment difficulties.

#### ***Adverse family environment***

It can be concluded from the current study, including findings from the focus group members, and a broad body of literature, that adverse family environments significantly influence adjustment at school and sustainment in education. It is also established that problems may arise in early childhood.

#### **7.4 Themes that produced new findings and therefore require additional research**

The aim of this exploratory qualitative research design was to discover ideas, perspectives and insights into the participants' experiences of school and how that trajectory may lead to involvement in the justice system. It is argued that exploratory research is valuable in identifying new ideas in an area in which limited information is available (Neuman 2004). Five new findings of significance emerged from the study that are not fully covered in previous literature. The themes are:

##### ***The experience of being bullied***

This study's findings, when considered alongside previous research, concurs that bullying in schools is a problem and that there are limited avenues for young people to disclose incidents due to an undercurrent of fear. Disclosure will often occur in sessions with other services out of the school environment. Stressors related to learning difficulties and peer victimisation placed young people on a downward spiral leading to sadness, despondency, acting out behaviour and eventually giving up. Based on the above findings, there is a strong argument for further qualitative research that allows for young people to express their lived experiences of bullying and how the phenomenon can be brought to the teacher's attention.

##### ***Externalised behaviour – anger, bullying others, and fights sometimes underpinned initially by embarrassment***

The current study highlights the need for more research around teachers' awareness of what is occurring when 'at risk' students are not coping, and feel embarrassed about asking for help, especially in front of peers. When a sense of hopelessness permeates, embarrassment may be overridden by 'acting out' or externalised behaviour. Limited studies touch on this area, strategies to address the issue, and ways that children can be given a voice and opportunity to express these concerns.

##### ***Problems associated with early school leaving***

It is clear from the current findings, supported by the focus group members, and a body of literature, that 'at risk' young males who leave school early are significantly impaired in training and job pathways. Further research is required around educational pathways that meet the

specific needs of this group that enables engagement with education with a parallel lens on suitable job pathways. This discussion needs to occur in early secondary school.

### ***The migrant/refugee experience: young men, schools and families***

Because of Australia's growing culturally diverse population, further research is warranted into the unique and varied educational needs of students at risk of criminal behaviour within a cultural mesosystem context. An Australian survey study, that investigated teachers' cultural understanding and confidence when working in culturally diverse classes, found that most teachers were not educated to work in classes with students of a non-English speaking background (Thomas & Kearney 2008, p.107). The researchers identified the limitations of their purely quantitative study thus recommending mixed methods research. The current study has captured the voices of these young men. More research is required on the unique commonalities and underlying cultural differences of the two groups identified in this study, Maori Pacific Islander and African background. The challenge is how educational and other departments, can connect with, and provide services, that will sustain education and divert these young men from the criminal justice system.

### ***African youth and the role of respect in police involvement***

This study found a small body of evidence that in Australia, young African people had an overwhelmingly negative relationship with the police and within that context, a perceived lack of respect equates to racial profiling. Further research is required into raising awareness of this paradigm. A surprise finding in the current study is the young men's positive relationships with teachers was at odds with their extremely negative relationships with the police.

## **7.5 Implications for policy and practice**

This section of the study confirms former knowledge, and along with the current findings, builds on the evidence base in relation to the young men's' perception of their lived school experiences and how that may relate to offending behaviour. How these findings might influence policy and practice standards to bring about change is discussed. The young men in this study could articulate clearly their experiences at school along with other factors such as: cultural influences, peer association and family difficulties that impacted behaviourally resulting in a pathway to crime.

The study implies that consideration be given to the early identification of language and/or learning difficulties, and additionally, that the style of learning is consistent with a young person's presentation and underlying needs. This needs to occur at the onset of the difficulties, when frustration turns to anger it is often too late. At that stage solace, identity and belonging is found with peers experiencing similar problems. The young men confirmed that bullying in schools is a problem and that there are few avenues to disclose incidents due to an undercurrent of fear. Disclosure will often occur in sessions with other services out of the school environment. Perhaps a more integrated collaboration with these external services is required.

The study's conclusions support the need for specialist services located within the school sector such as welfare services that could make assessments, deliver treatment and activate referrals, a 'hub' within the school system. For example, in the Netherlands, a program initiative called the Ethnic Minority Parents' Platform aims to include migrant parents in the extra curriculum activities in and outside of the school (Schleicher & Zoido 2016). There is a need for teachers and administrators to establish a supportive school climate within an ecological systems model, with a focus on relationships in which students feel secure, safe and have a sense of belonging. Teacher training in the management of 'at risk' students' needs to incorporate well-established models of intervention utilised in youth offending. The changing face of Australian schools sees the need for teachers to undertake training to raise awareness and understanding of work within culturally diverse student populations.

The findings suggest that the learning environment be more entertaining and meaningful, with curriculum individually tailored to better enable transition to training and/or job opportunities. This included – creative activities that are of interest to marginalised young people and conducted in and out of the classroom to alleviate boredom; activities and programs that 'make sense' in relation to future goals and aspirations; sports activities integrated into the school curriculum; the inclusion of social and political debate around authority figures, and systems associated with young peoples' rights; and the employment of cultural mentors.

The current study found the young men's home life was difficult. Family violence, conflict in the home, and alcohol and/or drug use impacted on the young person and their education. Only one of the 20 participant's parents were living together. The study suggests that school policy

might encompass strategies that fit within an ecological systems model for ‘at risk’ students. The ‘hub or centre for human services’, as mentioned above, would bring a pro-active approach to early and ongoing intervention. Families form part of this integrated model. Finally, and most important is the need for marginalised young male’s voices to be fully heard, understood and validated. The study findings have the capability to influence policy and practice standards within the school and associated systems for ‘at risk’ young males.

## **7.6 Strengths and limitations of the study**

### ***The study strengths***

This study used a qualitative research design to explore how school experiences might have influenced a trajectory into crime. The study’s design, which incorporated semi-structured interviews with the young males, along with focus group discussions and feedback around the themes identified, worked well. This firsthand information gleaned from the participants was thoughtful, detailed and insightful. This is particularly relevant, given that young offenders compare poorly with non-offending peers in their ability to express their thoughts and feelings (Snow & Powell 2005). This in-depth detail is not possible with quantitative methods. Additionally, young offenders are more often the subject of studies where information is obtained from workers and other sources. A strength of this study is that the young men were the primary data source, and from this source, that included young men from different cultures, a theoretical construct, of ecological systems theory evolved.

### ***The study’s limitations***

#### **Sample size**

A limitation is that qualitative data typically has a small sample size therefore the findings need to be explored in terms of within method and between method triangulation. Twenty young males were interviewed. Silverman (2013, p. 47) argues that what we are told in interviews is not necessarily true or false but ‘socially constructed narratives’. A benefit of undertaking small, qualitative studies, is that the consumer is given a voice in the development of services (Silverman, 2013, p. 23). Given the transitory nature of the young males involved in the study, a premeditated approach to the sample size (n=20), as opposed to a saturation concept, was

employed. It is argued that this approach is not necessarily consistent with the principles of qualitative research and the concept of saturation (Mason 2010).

### **Timeframe**

The research study was undertaken on a part time basis over an eight-year period. An examination of the literature and statistical data spanned this period. The findings reflect this timeframe and may have been different if there was a focus on more recent data.

### **Gender comparison**

The researcher's decision to exclude female participants was due to the over representation of males within the criminal justice system and her long-term experience of working primarily with young male offenders within the custodial and community sector. Statistics show that males outnumber female offenders three to one and that the distribution is similar across states and territories (ABS 2010). Australian data is supported by a US study which found that young females offended at 50 percent the rate of young males (Fergusson & Horwood 2002).

### **Sample bias**

Sample bias in this study warrants consideration. This point is particularly relevant due to the data catchment area which was Dandenong, a locality considered highly multicultural. Polgar and Thomas (2008, p. 89) argue that 'what is true in one social setting may not be true in another [and that] cultures change with time'. While the 2011 Census found that one in every four Australian residents (26 percent) was born overseas (ABS 2014), within the City of Greater Dandenong this figure is much higher with over fifty-one percent of the population born overseas and over fifty-five percent speaking another language in the home (DPCD Spatial Analysis and Research Branch July 2009). This population distribution is significant and important to this research study, given the ethnic background of the young male participants recruited for the study. As mentioned above, inductive, theoretical analysis aligned with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

### **One interview**

The validity and reliability of the data may have been improved with follow up interviews to validate the findings with the participants. This process is included in the steps taken during analysis using phenomenological descriptive methodology (Colaizzi 1978). However, this step



was not included in this study due to the participant group's transient nature over a significant time period.

### **Focus group**

The study's aim was to include main stream school teachers and police officers in the focus group discussions. Flyers were distributed to several primary and secondary schools in the Dandenong locality, special schools, youth justice, youth support services, and the Dandenong Police Station. Unfortunately, mainstream schools and the police failed to respond. Given that all participants had attended main stream schools at one stage of their education, teachers' and police officers' comments and insight, around the participant themes presented, would have improved validity and reliability. Four participants agreed to attend the Dandenong focus group, however, one member left the group early due to a work crisis. Due to the low number in Dandenong (n=3), a second focus group was arranged for Geelong, a locality convenient for the researcher. Nevertheless, the rich data obtained from the Dandenong focus group members who worked closely with 'at risk' youth in special schools and support services was insightful and relevant. While there were differences around the data from the two locations, there were also commonalities.

### **Chapter summary**

Chapter Seven summarised the study's findings. Nine predominant themes were identified, including four themes that supported existing literature, and five themes that may require additional research. The study's implications for policy and practice, and the study's strengths and limitations were also discussed.

### **Conclusion**

Through the lens of young males, several themes emerged in this research study about the experience of education in schools and how that experience may influence a trajectory into offending behaviour. These emerging themes were also validated through the focus group discussions. Four themes were supported by existing literature, *learning difficulties that led to embarrassment and frustration; school difficulties that resulted in identity problems: the sense of belonging found in peer relationships; alcohol and/or illicit substance use; and adverse family environments*. On the other hand, several themes were identified that require exploration through

further research. These findings include - *the experience of being bullied*, how young men can express their lived experiences of bullying, and in what manner the phenomenon can be brought to the teacher's attention; *externalised behaviour – anger, bullying others, and fights sometimes initially underpinned by embarrassment*, an avenue for young men to express their feelings of hopelessness thus interrupting the pathway to externalised patterns of behaviour; *problems associated with early school leaving*. Further research is required around educational pathways leading to job opportunities that meet the specific needs of this group; *the migrant/refugee experience* for those young males of African and Maori /Pacific Island descent. The challenge is how education and other departments, can connect with, and provide services, that will sustain education and divert these young men from the criminal justice system. Finally, *African youth and the role of respect in police involvement*. These young men had extremely negative relationships with the police within the context of a perceived lack of respect. They nevertheless found supportive relationships within the student/teacher context.

Based on the study's limitations that are detailed above, the views and perceptions of the young men involved in the study, the validation of these views from focus group members and the existing literature, it can be concluded that this study has contributed to the knowledge about young men's experience of school and how that may influence a trajectory into offending behaviour. The study also provides a basis for further research in the above-mentioned areas.

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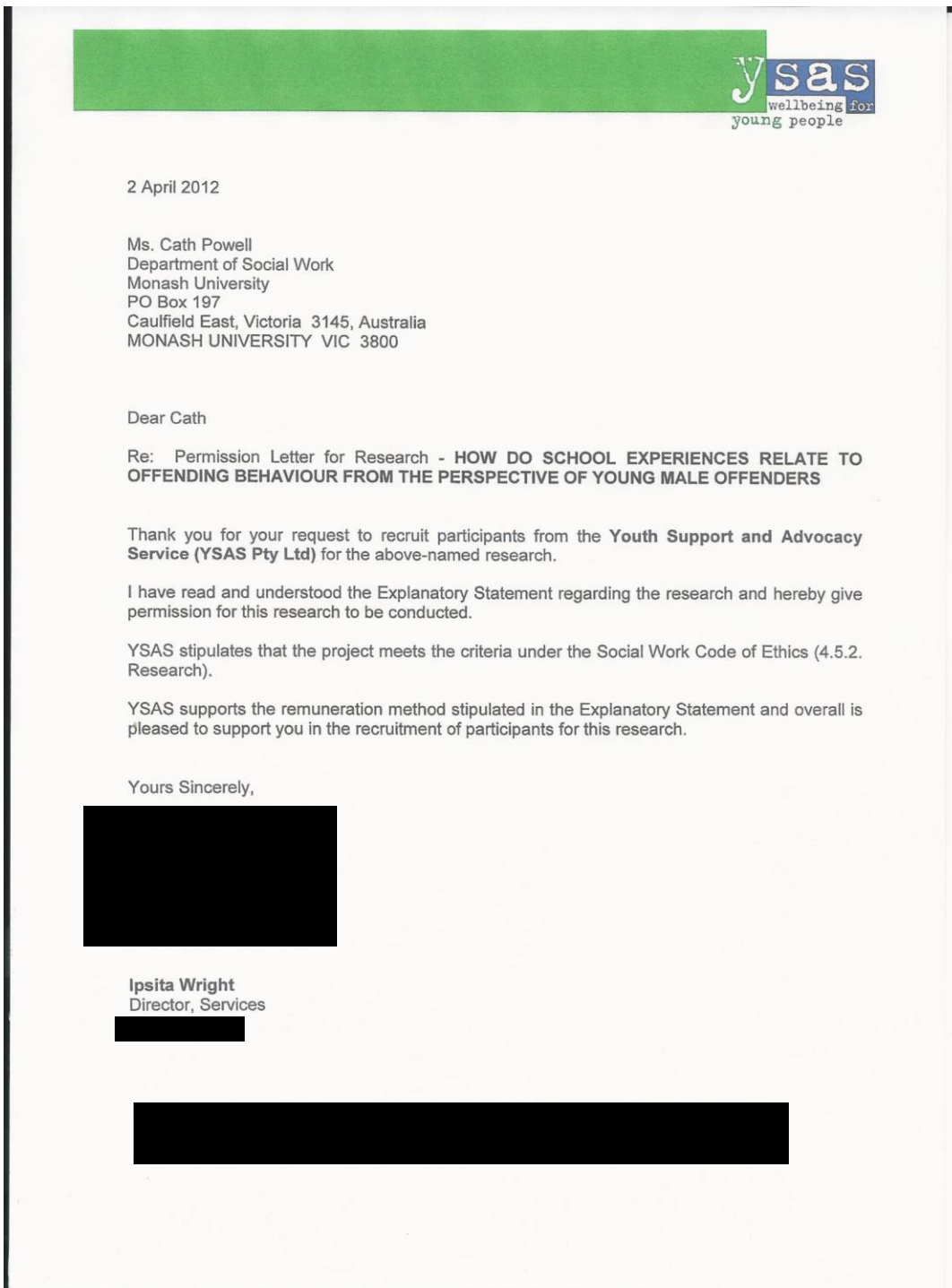
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## APPENDIX 1



## APPENDIX 2



MONASH University

Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC)  
Research Office

### Human Ethics Certificate of Approval

Date: 23 July 2012

Project Number: CF12/1459 - 2012000780

Project Title: How do school experiences relate to offending behaviour from the perspective of young male offenders?

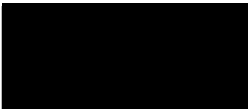
Chief Investigator: Assoc Prof Christopher Trotter

Approved: From 23 July 2012 to 23 July 2017

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#### Terms of approval

1. The Chief investigator is responsible for ensuring that permission letters are obtained, if relevant, and a copy forwarded to MUHREC before any data collection can occur at the specified organisation. **Failure to provide permission letters to MUHREC before data collection commences is in breach of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.**
2. Approval is only valid whilst you hold a position at Monash University.
3. It is the responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all investigators are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure the project is conducted as approved by MUHREC.
4. You should notify MUHREC immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.
5. The Explanatory Statement must be on Monash University letterhead and the Monash University complaints clause must contain your project number.
6. **Amendments to the approved project (including changes in personnel):** Requires the submission of a Request for Amendment form to MUHREC and must not begin without written approval from MUHREC. Substantial variations may require a new application.
7. **Future correspondence:** Please quote the project number and project title above in any further correspondence.
8. **Annual reports:** Continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an Annual Report. This is determined by the date of your letter of approval.
9. **Final report:** A Final Report should be provided at the conclusion of the project. MUHREC should be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.
10. **Monitoring:** Projects may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by MUHREC at any time.
11. **Retention and storage of data:** The Chief Investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of original data pertaining to a project for a minimum period of five years.



Professor Ben Canny  
Chair, MUHREC

cc: Ms Catherine Powell; Assoc Prof Pam Snow

## APPENDIX 3

MONASH University

### Participant Flyer

**We need your help .....**

**If you are male and aged 16 to 21 years we would like to find out what school was like for you.**

Monash University is running a research project about the relationship between school experience and involvement with justice services. We want to hear from young males about their experiences and opinions.

**If you would like to be involved in this research, please fill in the bottom section of this form and leave it in the box. I will then contact you. If you are involved in the study, you will be paid a \$50 store voucher.**

.....  
Yes! I would like to be involved in this research

☐

My first name and contact phone number is .....



## APPENDIX 4

### Appendix 4

MONASH University

#### Self-Report Participant Demographics Questionnaire

1. Code Name:.....
2. Date of birth:.....Age:.....
3. Family Constellation.....  
Genogram:
4. Cultural background.....
5. Could/can you get support from family members when needed.....
6. Have you been involved with child protection or mental health services.....
7. What Year level did you reach at school .....
8. Why did you leave school.....
9. If you attended TAFE/ other education or employed: How long? .....Why did you leave?.....
10. What drugs and/or alcohol do you use.....
11. What age were you when you first started using drugs and/or alcohol.....
12. Have you been in trouble with the police.....
13. How old were you when you first got into trouble with the police.....
14. What were your main offences.....

C. Powell – Demographics Questionnaire

## APPENDIX 5

MONASH University

### APPENDIX 5

#### Outline of Semi-structured Exploratory Interview

In order to elicit information from the participants, the process of the interview will explore the questions supporting the following themes. For example, information will be sought about **how the young person experienced their school work and the educational environment including any referrals for supplementary support.**

Questions such as:

*'Can you remember back when you started school, what was it like for you?'*

*'How much did you enjoy school?'*

*'How connected did you feel to other young people?'*

*'If you were having trouble at school, what would happen?'*

*'Was there anything at school or within the school environment that helped your situation?'*

#### **Issues pertaining to family life and the home and surrounding environment,**

*'Can you tell me something about what it was like at home?'*

*'If you were having trouble at school, how did you cope with that?'*

*'What was it like living in your neighbourhood?'*

C Powell – Exploratory Interview - 1

**Problems related to the onset of offending behaviour and/or peer involvement, including suspension or expulsion from school.**

*'What happened at school if there was a problem with your behaviour?'*

*'What age were you when you started to get into trouble at school?'*

*'What kinds of things did you get into trouble for?'*

*'Did you receive any counselling or support or punishment because of your behaviour?'*

*'Did you mix with other young people at school; what were they like?'*

*'If you did get into trouble, was it by yourself or with other people?'*

*'Did you have involvement with the police, court system or youth justice system at that stage?'*

*'What was your involvement?'*

**Post-school experience.**

*'What happened when you left school?'*

*'How did your family members react when you left school?'*

*'Did anyone from school talk to you about other educational programs, training programs or work options?'*

*'Were or are you involved with the police, court system or youth justice at this time?'*

*'Can you think of anything that could have interrupted the course you have taken?'*

C Powell – Exploratory Interview - 2

## APPENDIX 6

MONASH University

### Appendix 6 Explanatory Statement

DATE:

#### HOW DO SCHOOL EXPERIENCES RELATE TO OFFENDING BEHAVIOUR FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG MALE OFFENDERS?

This information sheet is for you to keep.

My name is **Cath Powell** and I am conducting a research project with **Associate Professor Christopher Trotter, an Associate Professor and lecturer** in the Department of **Social Work** and **Associate Professor Pamela Snow**, from the School of **Psychology** and **Psychiatry** towards a **Doctor of Philosophy** at Monash University. This means that I will be writing a **thesis which is the equivalent of a 300 page book**. We have funding from **Monash University**.

You are invited to take part in this study. Please read this Explanatory Statement in full before making a decision. You may also wish to discuss this with a friend or family member.

#### Why did I choose YSAS clients?

I have worked with YSAS clients for many years in my position as a case manager and team leader in youth justice, and also as a counsellor in my private practice. I am aware that many of the young people that I have come in contact with have left school early.

#### The aim/purpose of the research

The aim of the study is to talk to you about what school was like for you and how you feel your school experiences now impact on your life in general.

I am conducting the research to get a better understanding of possible links between negative school experiences and later involvement with the justice system.

#### Possible benefits

The results of this research might help teachers and other people working with young people to have a better understanding of how young people are coping at school, especially if the family environment and other issues such as learning difficulties are

causing problems. If young people feel connected and supported at school, they may stay at school and be less likely to get into trouble. You won't necessarily benefit directly from the research, though you might find it helpful to talk about some of these experiences.

#### **What does the research involve?**

If you agree to take part, I would like to talk to you for about an hour about your experiences of school and find out whether you believe these experiences lead to involvement with the justice system. I will allow you to have a break in the interview if you ask for one. The interview will take place at YSAS where you normally see your YSAS worker. If you agree, the interview will be audio (tape) recorded. In the days or weeks afterwards, I might also need to phone you to ask some more questions or make sure I have understood you properly. I will ask you if this is okay in the interview. You will be given a list of suitable community supports relevant to education, training and employment in your locality, if you would like this information.

#### **What if you feel upset or uncomfortable during or after the interview?**

It is not expected that taking part in this study will cause you distress. However, you can tell me to stop the interview if you feel it is too hard to talk about your experiences. If you are upset at any stage of the interview I will give you support and arrange for you to see a counsellor at a service where you already get support. This will not cost you any money.

#### **Payment**

You will be given a \$50 Coles Myer store voucher at the end of the interview.

#### **You can withdraw from the research**

This study is voluntary and you do not have to agree to be involved. Even if you agree to take part, you can change your mind, during or soon after the interview. However, one month after you participate in the interview, it will not be possible to say you don't want to be included in the study, because your data will already be in the process of being analysed.

#### **Confidentiality**

You will be given a substitute name therefore your name will not be recorded with your story. This will help protect your identity and keep what you tell me confidential. Only I will know your name and contact details. When the project is published it will not include your name or refer to you in any way that other people may know it is you. To help me protect your privacy, I will ask you not to tell me about any illegal activities that have not already been reported to the police

### What information will be shared

If you say you plan to hurt yourself, I may have to tell a mental health worker. If you say you plan to hurt someone else I may need to tell the police.

### Storage of data

Your interview details will be stored in accordance with Monash University regulations, and will be kept on University premises, in a locked filing cabinet for 5 years. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

### Results

If you would like to have a copy of a one page summary of the research project, it will be available at the end of the research project in 2017. Please contact Cath Powell by email: [cepow1@student.monash.au](mailto:cepow1@student.monash.au).

### Services to access if you feel distressed after the interview

City of Greater Dandenong (Youth Stop) [REDACTED] Dandenong Ph: [REDACTED]

Wesley Youth Services Dandenong – [REDACTED] Dandenong Ph: [REDACTED]

<p>If you would like to contact the researchers about any aspect of this study, please contact the Chief Investigator:</p>	<p>If you have a complaint concerning the manner in which this research CF12/1459-2012000780 is being conducted, please contact:</p>
<p>Department of Social Work Monash University [REDACTED] Caulfield East, Victoria 3145, Australia</p> <p>Tel: [REDACTED]</p> <p>Email: [REDACTED]</p>	<p><b>Executive Officer</b> <b>Monash University Human Research</b> <b>Ethics Committee (MUHREC)</b> [REDACTED]</p> <p><b>Research Office</b> <b>Monash University VIC 3800</b> [REDACTED]</p>

Thank you.

**Cath Powell**

**Associate Professor Chris Trotter**

**Associate Professor Pamela Snow**

## APPENDIX 7

MONASH University

### PHD FOCUS GROUP

October 11, 2016

1:00-2:00

YSAS Dandenong

**Moderator:** Cath Powell

**Assistant:** Michelle Burgess

**Attendees:** Karla – Nelson Park, John – Nelson Park, Sharon – Stepping Up

**Research Topic:** HOW DO SCHOOL EXPERIENCES RELATE TO OFFENDING BEHAVIOUR FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG MALE OFFENDERS.

#### **Background:**

The **purpose** of the research is to better understand the lived school experiences of 20 young males, aged 16-21, and how these experiences may influence a trajectory into criminal behaviour. To understand this, the young males were interviewed about their experiences of school and how those perceived experiences related to their offending behaviour.

#### **Goal of Focus Group:**

The **goal** of this focus group is to validate and comment on the trends that emerged from the interviews. In order to do this, I am interested in your thoughts and opinions; do these findings make sense to you and what are your thoughts about what this could mean for policy and practice.

#### **AGENDA ITEMS**

Topic	Presenter	Time allotted
✓ Welcome & Housekeeping (phones off)	Cath Powell	2 mins
✓ Introductions	Group	3 mins
✓ Purpose of Focus Group	Cath Powell	2 mins
✓ Ground Rules	Cath Powell	2 mins
✓ Topics covered in research and Focus Group Questions	Group	50 mins
○ How the young person experienced their school work and the educational environment including any referrals for supplementary support? (4 questions)		
○ Issues pertaining to family life and the homes and surrounding environment (1 question)		
○ Problems related to the onset of offending behavior and / or peer involvement (2 questions)		
○ Post school experiences (1 question)		
○ Participant recommendations (1 question)		

## **GROUND RULES**

### **1. WE WANT YOU TO DO THE TALKING.**

- We would like everyone to participate.
- I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.
- Please ask if you are unsure of anything.

### **2. THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS**

- Every person's experiences and opinions are important.
- Speak up whether you agree or disagree.
- We want to hear a wide range of opinions.

### **3. WHAT IS SAID IN THIS ROOM STAYS HERE**

- We want folks to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up.

### **4. WE WILL BE TAPE RECORDING THE GROUP**

- We want to capture everything you have to say.
- We don't identify anyone by name in our report. You will remain anonymous.



## APPENDIX 8

**MONASH UNIVERSITY**



### **FOCUS GROUP FLYER**

Join us for a Focus Group, your opinions and experiences matter.

The Focus Group is recruiting a representative from:

- Primary and secondary school
- Independent school for disengaged young people
- Police
- Youth justice
- Youth support service (YSAS)

The purpose of this research is to better understand the lived school experiences of 20 young males, aged 16-21, and how those experiences may influence a trajectory into criminal behaviour. The goal of the focus group is to respond to the collated themes that emerged from the interviews.

If you would like to be involved in this research, please contact: Cath Powell on [REDACTED]. If you are involved in the study, you will receive two movie tickets in appreciation of your time and contribution.

## APPENDIX 9

APPENDIX 9  
MONASH University  
Self-report participant demographic

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Family support	Parents separated	DHS/MH involvement	Year completed	D&A	Onset D&A	Age police involvement	Offences
1	20	Maori	Yes	No	No	Y.10	Cannabis	15	15	Break & enter
2	18	Maori	Yes	Yes	No	Y. 8	Cannabis	8	12	Burglary
4	20	Maori	Yes	Yes	Yes	Y.10	Cannabis Alcohol	9 12	14	Theft robbery
5	18	Sudanese	Yes	Yes	No	Y11	Alcohol	16	16	Assault
6	18	Sudan	Yes	Yes	No	Y11	Cannabis alcohol	16 18	17	robbery
8	17	Thailand	No	Yes	Not sure	Y12	Cannabis	14	17	assault
9	18	Sudanese	No	Yes	Yes	Y10	Cannabis Alcohol	14 12	14-15	TOMV
10	21	Australian	Yes	Yes	No	Y11	Cannabis Alcohol ICE	10 12	6	Theft
11	19	Sudanese	No	Yes	No	Y12	Cannabis Alcohol	14 14	16	Property damage Assault
12	21	Sth Sudan	Yes	Yes	No	Y12	Cannabis Alcohol	17 17	15	Assaults
13	18	Kenya	Yes	Yes	No	Y12	Cannabis Alcohol	16 16	12	Assaults Robbery
14	19	Sth Sudan	Uncle	Yes	No	Y11	Cannabis Alcohol	13 13	17	Affray
15	19	Australian	Extended	Yes	Yes	Y9	Cannabis Hallucinogenic	14 17	14	Arson
16	17	Samoan	Yes	Yes	No	Y7	Cannabis + Alcohol	12 12	13	Armed Robbery
17	19	Indigenous Australian	No	Yes	Yes	Y8	Cannabis Alcohol	14 11	14	Armed Robbery
18	18	Australian	Father	Yes	Yes	Y10	Cannabis + Alcohol	13 13	13	Assaults AVO
19	17	Australian	No	Yes	Yes	Y11 -current	Cannabis ICE, heroin +	10 13	12	Burglary TOMV
20	20	Maori	Slight	Yes	No	Y11	Cannabis Alcohol	13 13	15	Culp Driv
21	21	Maori	Mother	Yes	Yes	Y9	Cannabis Alcohol	15 14	4	Assaults
22	21	Maori	Cousins	Yes	Yes	Y10	Cannabis Alcohol	9 11	12	Asssault

## APPENDIX 10

### **Confirmation of candidature: Cath Powell**

**Date of presentation: 7.2.12**

**Research Topic: Experience and perception of young males: school and justice system**

The Review Panel: Associate Professor Rosemary Sheehan (Convenor of the panel)  
Associate Professor Chris Trotter (Supervisor)  
Dr. Catherine Flynn

Cath Powell undertook an oral presentation and tabled a written paper on her doctoral study at the Dept of Social Work Higher Degrees by Research Conference held 6-7 February 2012.

The audience comprised five senior academics from Social Work, all of whom are research supervisors, and 30 postgraduate research students.

Her presentation covered a description of the project, which included a background to the problem and its significance, a discussion of the literature, a presentation of her research design, and the project's timeline. She has applied for Ethics approval.

The Confirmation Panel commented that a clearer link between the Literature Review and the Research Question needs to be made. Moreover, the Research Question needs clearer explication, what exactly is the student trying to discover? For example, what can take place in the school system that is a protective factor for young men who may enter the criminal justice system. Clearer links do need to be made between the school experience and offending behaviour. What are critical transition points for young people also need to be noted. It is suggested there be more than one data source, perhaps a focus group with teacher offers more substantive data. This could be achieved by collating the themes emerging from interviews with young men and asking teachers to respond to these, a way of examining the client perspective.

It was agreed however that the research question will generate a complex and significant study. The Review panel is satisfied with Cath's research progress and study proposal and recommend her candidature is confirmed.

Associate Professor Rosemary Sheehan (Panel Convenor)