# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL AND YOUTH OFFENDING

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research, conducted with a sample of young people in three New Zealand youth justice residential facilities, was to explore the compulsory school experience as perceived by young people who went on to commit serious criminal offences. By listening to their stories I hoped to identify the risk factors, if any, that schools contribute to the developmental pathways towards criminal offending. A significant finding was that although the school experience does not cause a young person to commit crimes, the cumulative effect of negative school experiences can result in a student's alienation from the education system, aggravating pre-existing risk factors that lead a vulnerable person towards chronic criminal offending. What also emerged was the unique opportunity that schools provide to interrupt the pathway to youth offending through a process of early identification and timely intervention.

## YOUNG OFFENDERS IN NEW ZEALAND – AOTEAROA

Although most young New Zealanders make significant, positive contributions to their families/whānau, peer groups, schools and communities, many children and young people offend at some stage while they are growing up. The majority do so in a limited way, committing only minor offences infrequently that may not come to the attention of the police. In 2007 there were 1,540 police apprehensions of 14- to 16-year-olds per 10,000 of the population for non-traffic offences, the majority of which were offences against property (see Figure 1). A significant number of these offences, according to New Zealand primary youth court judge Andrew Becroft, are committed by a small group of young people, a high proportion of whom are Māori (Becroft 2003, 2004a).

## INFLUENCES ON YOUNG PEOPLE TO OFFEND

There are a number of factors that contribute to the trajectory towards youth offending, including being born into a family that values antisocial behaviour or lacks effective parenting skills (Lashlie 2002), peer group influence (Fagan and Najman 2003), neighbourhood and community factors, and low socio-economic status (Lipsey and Derzon 1998). However, it is not just the external environment that negatively affects some children. There is evidence to suggest that some people may be predisposed towards antisocial behaviour and criminal offending. This may be through personal characteristics that lean towards aggressive and impulsive behaviour, or because of neurological damage and cognitive impairment, possibly as a result of prenatal exposure to drugs and/or alcohol (Loeber and Farrington 1998). There is also a link between young people offending and non-engagement with the school system (Becroft 2004a, Gottfredson 2001). We know that many young offenders were out of school at the time of their offending, but there is limited information on why these youth became alienated from the school system: did they leave
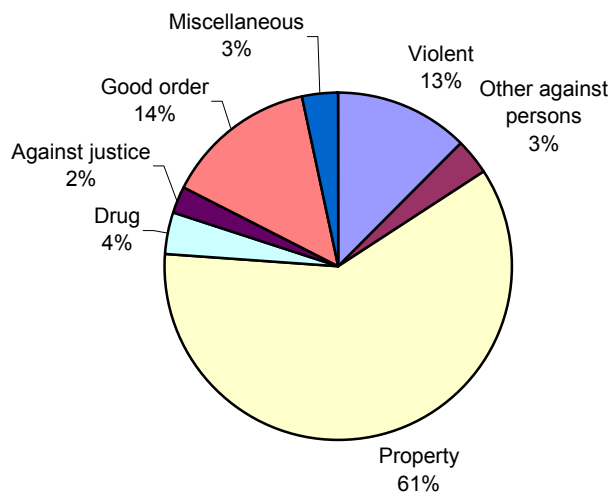
school to offend or offend because they were out of school? There is even less information on the role schools may play in the pathway to youth offending.

**Figure 1  Types of Offences, 14- to 16-year-olds, 2007**



Source: Ministry of Justice 2009

## THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS IN YOUTH OFFENDING

Substantial research has gone into identifying the risk factors that cause a young person to offend, but despite the thousands of hours that students spend in school there is little information on the role of schools in youth offending. From the research data that does exist it is clear that educational success and school attachment are key protective factors in preventing offending by young people (Gottfredson 2001, Hirschi 1969, Maughan 1994, Sprott et al. 2000). However, schools have also been implicated in contributing to young people's risk of criminal offending (Rutter et al. 1979). These "education-created" risk factors can be placed into seven categories.

### 1. Inadequate Transition to School, and from Primary to Secondary School

All school transitions – including entry into primary from preschool, intermediate from primary school, or secondary school from intermediate – present developmental challenges that rely on the previous acquisition of essential social skills, and each brings its own unique risk factors (Kellam et al. 1998). These risk factors include adapting to an unfamiliar classroom environment, new teacher relationships and the reconstruction of the peer group. Children have to adapt to a range of new demands and expectations from previously unknown adults, negotiate new roles for themselves, form new relationships with peers, and incorporate new dimensions into their self-evaluations (Reinke and Herman 2002).

The transition from primary to secondary school is particularly challenging because it involves the movement from one teacher to multiple teachers, a few subjects taught in one classroom by one teacher to multiple subjects taught by a number of teachers in different classrooms, differing teacher styles, greater and more complex academic demands, and greater demands for self-monitoring and self-reliance, with the need to move around several classrooms (Kellam et al. 1998, Wasserman and Miller 1998). This transition period is especially risky for girls, who are more likely than boys to experience pubertal maturity at the same time as they experience the transition from primary to secondary school (Caspi et al. 1993, Marcotte et al. 2002, Pepler and Craig 2005).

## 2. An Unhealthy School Climate

An unhealthy school climate is linked with a poorly organised, malfunctioning school that has a prevalent sense of despondency among students and staff, accompanying high rates of teacher and student absenteeism, and a higher incidence of school mobility (McEvoy and Welker 2001). Such schools are characterised by teachers who are routinely late to class and students being left unsupervised and vulnerable; cramped classrooms and overcrowding; poor physical condition and appearance of school buildings and grounds; high student–teacher ratios; and insufficient teacher training on effective behaviour management (Akin-Little and Little 2003, Kashani et al. 2001, Leone et al. 2003). An unhealthy school climate not only contributes to academic failure, leading to a lack of school attachment, school drop-out and criminal offending, but can also contribute to aggressive students' violent behaviour (Edwards 2001, Loeber and Farrington 2000, Reinke and Herman 2002).

## 3. Schools' Contribution to Academic Failure

A number of longitudinal studies demonstrate that children who are struggling academically are more likely to turn to crime than those who are performing adequately or well (e.g. Dishion et al. 1991, Elliot and Voss 1974, Flannery 2000, Seydlitz and Jenkins 1998). This is supported by evidence that the intellectual functioning of young offenders is at the low-average to average range and that they have significant deficits in reading, maths, and written and oral language compared to their non-offending peers (Leone et al. 2003). There is New Zealand evidence that contributions to academic failure, other than low intelligence, lack of student interest and behavioural problems, include ineffective and inappropriate teaching methods, and a school personnel's belief that students from lower socio-economic, disadvantaged families and minority groups have only limited potential and do not require consideration or extension (Macfarlane 2004). It has also been argued that examinations, testing and class grouping are biased, with children from lower socio-economic homes being less likely to be placed into classes that will lead them to university, and that some schools have been or are racially segregated, to the detriment of students' educational attainment (Seydlitz and Jenkins 1998).

## 4. Anti-social Peer Relationships Formed at School

Because they assemble together large numbers of at-risk youth, schools can become breeding grounds for the development of criminal offending, especially where there is little adult supervision (Cohen and Felson 1979). Both inside and outside the classroom, students develop social hierarchies and groups that have a significant influence on their performance and play a large role in shaping both their appropriate and inappropriate behaviours (Hann and Boek 2001, Reinke and Herman 2002). Particularly at risk are children who exhibit

verbally and physically aggressive behaviours, especially those who display non-normative forms of aggression such as relationally aggressive boys and overtly aggressive girls (Bloomquist and Schnell 2002).

Once rejected, these children remain isolated from "normal" peers, even after interventions have been implemented to improve their social behaviour. This peer rejection deprives a child of the socialising experiences that he or she may obtain from pro-social peers and sets the stage for him or her to become involved with an antisocial peer group (Church 2003, Gardner et al. 2004). This process of peer rejection spiralling to disruptive behaviours and youth offending begins in the primary school years and accelerates during the intermediate and high school years, becoming more serious, more frequent and more covert as the children mature (Church 2003, McMahon and Forehand 2003, Reinke and Herman 2002). New Zealand's detention system, whereby students being punished for school misconduct are grouped together during lunch periods, after school and on the occasional Saturday, can become breeding grounds for discontented, embittered and alienated students to mix with like-minded peers.

## 5. Negative Relationships between Students and School Personnel

Research evidence verifies that a teacher's style, attitude and expectations can adversely affect students' educational and social outcomes (e.g. Kennedy and Kennedy 2004, McEvoy and Welker 2001). Where the teacher–student relationship is characterised by high levels of conflict and negative interactions, a vicious cycle can be set in motion in which there is an escalation in the student's antisocial responses to the teacher's requests, a punitive reaction to this response from the teacher, and an intensification of negative behaviour as a reply from the student. Instead of allowing that the child's behaviours are escalating as a response to their own treatment of the child, teachers are more likely to blame the student's challenging behaviours on his or her unwillingness to be cooperative, or on some other external factor such as the child's dysfunctional upbringing (Hyman and Winchell 2000). When teachers cannot cope with the stress and frustration associated with working with these difficult students, they react to minor problems with irritability, fear, counter-aggression and negative thinking, which often escalates the frequency and severity of the child's aggressive behaviours (Morrison and Skiba 2001, Reinke and Herman 2002). Church (2003) attributes the ambivalence to working with difficult, time-consuming children to the teachers' lack of knowledge about how to work with defiant and antisocial students.

## 6. Mistreatment by School Personnel

Halkias et al. (2003) and Piekarska (2000) identify two categories in the student–school personnel relationship that traumatise students: deliberate versus unintentional maltreatment, the difference being determined by the adult's intent to cause harm to the student while seeking compliance. Deliberate maltreatment involves punitive disciplinary strategies and control techniques that are based on fear and intimidation; for example, verbal assaults, sarcasm and ridicule, isolating a student from his or her peers, allowing or ignoring peer humiliation, sexual harassment, humiliating in front of peers in relation to their learning difficulties, calling them liars and criminals, and personal attacks regarding their appearance, family and choice of friends. Unintentional maltreatment is demonstrated by involuntary provision of a low quantity and quality of human interaction, and providing limited opportunities for students to develop self-worth. At the extreme end of teacher abuse is the use of corporal punishment, the purposeful infliction of pain or confinement as a penalty for

an offence (Halkias et al. 2003), and racism or other forms of prejudice directed at students who are already marginalised within the school setting (Cunningham 2003, Puketapu-Andrews 1997).

## 7. School Policy Abuse

Senior management in schools, supported by their board of trustees, can victimise students by using legitimised but inappropriate punitive disciplinary practices to deter students' behaviours (Morrison and Skiba 2001). Intolerant, zero-tolerance policies such as school stand-downs, suspension, exclusion and early school exemptions provide opportunities for at-risk, alienated youth to associate, unsupervised, with deviant peers (Leone et al. 2003, Morrison and Skiba 2001). In general, zero-tolerance practices are only effective in immediately stopping undesirable behaviour in the school setting simply because the antisocial student is removed from the school grounds and transferred out into the community (Hyman and Snook 1999).

## RESEARCH AIM

In comparison to the substantial research focusing on identifying the risk factors that cause a young person to offend, there is a scarcity of qualitative research investigating how young offenders perceive their mainstream school experience. It was the aim of this research study, through the stories of young people who have committed serious criminal offences, to better understand the role the school experience plays, if any, in the pathway to criminal offending.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paradigm or basic set of beliefs that guided the research study is epistemological subject practice (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). I chose to work from this paradigm because of my belief that social interaction should be examined from the participants' perspective. My choice of strategy of inquiry is constructivist theory, based on my conviction that we come to know what has happened partly in terms of what others reveal as their social experience through their stories; that knowledge is socially constructed (Janesick 2000).

The design for the research centred on individual interviews with 25 young people held on "remand" or on "supervision with residence" at one of New Zealand's three Child, Youth and Family residential youth justice facilities. Through conversations and informal interviews, supported by a pack of "memory-jogging" cards, volunteers were invited to share stories about their primary and secondary school experiences. Each conversation and informal interview was face-to-face, audio-taped with a cassette note-taker that was in reach of the participant, and lasted between 40 minutes and 2 hours. Interviews finished at the request of each individual participant.

## The Participants

Of the 25 volunteers who were interviewed for the study, 19 were male and 6 were female. While not deliberately contrived, this percentage closely resembles New Zealand's statistics for gender differences in youth offending (Becroft 2003). The age of the young people ranged from 14 years 5 months to 16 years 11 months. The average age was 15 years 9 months and was slightly higher for the girls (16 years 1 month) than the boys (15 years 8 months), which was not statistically significant given the small number interviewed.

Twelve of the males identified themselves as Māori, three as European/Māori, three as Pacific and one as New Zealand European. Of the six girls interviewed, two identified themselves as Māori, two as New Zealand European (although one mentioned her father was part Māori), one as Pacific and one as Māori/Pacific. These figures correspond with earlier studies that ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented in the youth offending population (Becroft 2004b), with Māori youth being three times more likely to be apprehended, prosecuted and convicted than non-Māori youth (Curtis et al. 2002).

Demographically, the young people had attended schools throughout the whole of New Zealand, from as far south as Invercargill to the north of Auckland. Although more of the participants were from the North Island (13 boys and 5 girls) than the South Island (6 boys and 1 girl), this is representative of the density of the New Zealand population. According to the 2001 Census,[2] 76.6% of young people aged from 10 to 19 years resided in the North Island and 23.4% resided in the South Island. Although all were living in urban areas at the time of apprehension, several of the participants migrated there from rural or semi-rural areas, either because they were following or seeking the lifestyle of their antisocial peers, or because they were sent there by family because of school dropout, exclusion and/or family disharmony.

## Memory-Jogging Cards

To encourage a sense of choice and to reduce leading direction by the researcher, a selection of 54 memory-jogging cards was created based on school-related topics. When offered to each participant, the memory-jogging cards were shuffled and presented face down. Each young person was invited to use the cards or not, as they wished. It was equally acceptable if the young person chose not to use the cards but preferred to talk at random about their school experience.

I created the laminated cards to focus the participants' attention on their school experience. The cards also proved useful in that they gave the young people something physical to handle, drawing their attention away from the researcher and the audiotape. The colours of the cards were chosen at random: green, pink, cream, purple, white and grey. Two colours associated with gang membership – red and blue – were deliberately avoided. Where I felt it was an appropriate match to the word, a picture was added to the card. The purpose behind the pictures was to make the cards more attractive and friendly to the participants, and as "face-saving" prompts allowing for the possibility that a young person may have difficulty with the written word.

All of the young people opted to use the memory-jogging cards. They did this in a variety of ways: some flicked a card over, spoke to the topic, set it aside and took the next card; others created two piles, one they spoke to, the other they ignored; several shuffled the cards and spoke to them at random; and some of the young people put them into different piles, grouping them in colours or categories that made sense to them. One young person asked me to read the cards out loud. An unexpected use of the cards by several young people was to flick the next one over when they wanted to stop dialogue about the previous subject area; the card became their way of communicating to the researcher that they no longer wanted to carry on with that particular line of conversation.

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[2]  Statistics New Zealand, Sex by Age Group for Census Usually Resident Population Count.

The pictures on the memory-jogging cards proved useful as association prompts, sometimes evoking a memory of school that was unrelated to the word on the card. Two cards, "touching" and "seeing", were discarded following the first three interviews because they caused some confusion and directed the stories towards the participants' charges rather than focusing their attention on their school experiences.

During one of the first interviews, after all the memory-jogging cards had been considered, the conversation naturally flowed to a discussion about how the young person would change the school if he were the principal. Apparently not in a hurry to exit the interview, the participant continued with suggestions as to how he would like school to be for his own children. While recognising that this strayed from the philosophical foundation of phenomenology, because the idea derived from a participant, and because of the subsequent richness of the data that came from the spontaneous conversation, I concluded subsequent interviews with what I refer to as the "magic wand" questions: "If you were the principal and you had a magic wand, how would you change the school?" and "How would you like school to be for your children?"

The use of the memory-jogging cards, combined with the flexibility of the research methodology, resulted in a rich collection of stories about the young people's school experiences.

## RESULTS

### Emergent Themes

The primary messages that emanated from the young people's stories were "I cannot do it", "I do not fit", "I cannot sit and be quiet the way that the other kids can", "I cannot survive in this system unless I self-medicate", "In this school environment, it is not safe to be me; it is not me to sit and be quiet and do my work". To many of the participants there was an overwhelming sense of unfairness, of victimisation that led to frustration and a search for ways to get out of their school life-world. It was their perspective that having to attend school was imposed on them. They did not want to attend school; it was never their choice. They describe feeling alienated from the school system and from their pro-social peers. Many found learning difficult, especially towards the end of primary school. The majority were bored with classroom routine and behavioural expectations and used this to justify their antisocial, impulsive and aggressive behaviours. They had little desire to comply with teachers' instructions, and while there was an expectation that other students should follow the school rules, they did not accept that the rules applied to themselves. Truancy, a symptom of their alienation, was routine. Discipline, detentions, stand-downs, suspension and exclusions were common occurrences. But perhaps the most dominant theme was that school personnel treated them unfairly.

### School Personnel

In general, the principal was someone they perceived as deserving of their respect: someone they would like to take an interest in them and their achievements in school, and whom they

expected would treat them fairly. Even when the principal was applying zero tolerance, Jace[3] perceived he had his interests at heart:

> "The principal told me to find another school because he didn't want to expel me. He just ... instead of expelling me he just let me go. He was just being polite, putting it in a polite way. Rather than expelling me. Making my records look bad."

By treating them fairly the young people meant listening to their explanation of an incident before determining that they were at fault, and taking appropriate punitive action not only against them but also against others who were involved in the incident, whether they were teachers or their peers. An exception to this was Terry, who felt his principal "targeted" him and others:

> "I didn't like the principal cause he didn't like me. I was always in, always on his list. His top ten list. Top ten bad ones."

While most saw the principal as someone trying to be fair, the participants' perception of their deputy principals was that they were unfair, authoritarian and punitive:

> "Went to [deputy principal's] office again and got suspended, my first three weeks and got suspended twice. And had enough, just walked out of school." (Alan)

Almost uniformly they perceived that the deputy principal did not like them. Two of the young people explained:

> "Worst memory of school is my deputy principal … This was at intermediate. She's just a person that, well, everyone used to say she was racist and that was about it. I used to always get …  she used to always suspend me." (Ania)

> "Each time I got kicked out of our class, like for being disruptive, we had to go to him [deputy principal] and I was, yeah, like in there every day." (Alan)

Unable or unwilling to differentiate the role of school disciplinarian with the person, both the male and the female respondents' negative reaction to the deputy principal increased with the telling of each adverse encounter. Their feelings intensified when the young person sharing the story was Māori and the deputy principal was not. Matai appeared quite traumatised by his encounter with the deputy principal at his college, whom he described as "white":

> "This deputy principal, she used to be pretty racist and didn't like me. And she used to go, 'Don't hang out with this guy, he's a drug dealer,' to my mates … Not much students at that school liked her anyway. That's why I stopped school. Dropped out of school because of her. They were going to stand me down but I just left before they had a chance."

## Teachers

The participants' stories about their teachers could be separated into the teachers they preferred and the teachers they disliked. According to the female participants, their preferred teacher was female, listened to their personal issues and concerns, offered mutual respect, was kind, sensitive and flexible, and looked beyond their behaviour to see what was troubling them. Ania loved one of her teachers:

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[3] Pseudonyms have been used for all participants and any person named in the data

> "Oh, I loved her, she was the best teacher you could think of. She respected us in a way, if you gave her respect she would respect you back, and when we wanted to do programmes and you was listening and that, you were like being all right at school, in class, she'd do, do what you asked her. I just liked her cause of that."

Siara talked about two teachers she liked: one was in primary school, the other was at intermediate. They shared a common language:

> "They related to us as if they were teenagers. They could talk to us like teenagers and like, if you get aggro, you know, they'll just give it back to you and understand what, you know, what you're doing to them … It was easy to talk to them, like you could talk to them about anything, like anything, like boyfriends and stuff or anything about school and they were always there to listen."

Secondary to their need for a nurturing teacher was a teacher with skills and techniques that enabled them to learn; teachers that made the effort to explain:

> "She always explained everything so you wouldn't get laughed at, and she would explain it to the class and then if you had a problem you'd put up your hand and she would come and explain it properly." (Elle)

In contrast, the male participants' preferred teacher would support them in the classroom and provide them with a sense of accomplishment in an environment that lacked conflict. Secondary to the teacher's ability to promote their learning, they appreciated someone who related to them as individuals, showed them respect, kindness and understanding, and was flexible in his or her classroom behaviour management skills. Lee and Terry described their best teacher as follows:

> "She was awesome. She was always easy going, understood what was on, understood that people needed time out, they could have time out … Yeah she taught pretty good. I passed, got good reports. Passed all my exams, or whatever." (Lee)

> "He'd let me push the boundaries but as far as he wanted them to go, but other teachers wouldn't. As soon as I'd done something just hop on it right away and give me detentions and stuff. But my English teacher was like, he'd let stuff go by and then tell me when to stop and when enough was enough." (Terry)

Wayne's story illustrates how the teacher may not even know she or he is having a positive influence:

> "Best teacher. Just 4th form because all the naughty boys went to his class because he was a bit of a hard dude, but he wasn't, he was cool. Just a cool fella. If we didn't finish our work he'd let us finish it in our own time. Like take it home for homework or something. If we didn't finish it he'd help us out, tell us what to do. He was just too much. Probably didn't even know I liked him."

The positive stories the participants shared about their teachers were far exceeded by the negative stories, supporting existing research evidence that teachers' style, attitude and expectations adversely affect students' educational and social outcomes (e.g. Hyman and Snook 2000, Piekarska 2000). All but one of the participants reported negative relationship issues involving personal conflict with teachers. Poto saw teachers as people trying to do a difficult job:

> "I reckon all the teachers are just doing their job, and they just, like some classes I'll go in I'll be good, and like other people will try and, the teacher is trying to say something and she's stressing out and she's trying to take on whole 30, 30 students in the class. I don't know how they do it now, but those places I just blend in."

For both genders, the fundamental characteristics of their worst teacher was one who used his or her position to hurt, harass, shame or humiliate them in front of their peers, who punished them unfairly, harassed them for minor misdemeanours and who was perceived as being unable to teach:

> "She was this mean as teacher. Like you could be in a big assembly, right, and you're all sitting there, you are just telling your mates to move over, she'll shame you out in front of a hundred and something people that go to your school. You stand! Ow." (Ania)

The only gender difference was when the girls talked about a teacher favouring other girls, or isolating them from their friends:

> "I didn't like the teacher cause she was bossy. She used to always put me with these people I didn't like. Made me sit with them and I wasn't allowed to sit with my mates. Because my friends are disruptive." (Sina)

Perceiving that the teacher was picking on her and her friends for minor transgressions, Siara concluded that this preference was racially motivated:

> "She's a real racist. I knew it. I knew it was because I was Māori … she's just real racist. Walked up the hallway, something's wrong with your uniform. She'd just pick it up just like that but all the white girls, oh no, pretty little angels."

Other attributes of ineffective teachers as identified by the female participants included moodiness and being insensitive to their needs, focusing on their negative rather than their positive qualities, being overly authoritarian, and delivering boring, uninteresting lessons. Conversely, the boys expressed concern if the teacher focused attention on them; this was interpreted as being "picked on", as Pat explained:

> "Worst teacher! Always he had a go at my face, always. We didn't like each other. Not one bit. I think the first day I did a bad impression and he didn't like me from then … He always used to just give me detentions. Even the nicest bits, and I'd get on without talking, he goes, 'Did you say something, Pat?' and I'd say, 'Nah, nah' then 'Five minutes detention, Pat'."

The boys also disliked teachers whom they considered to be unhelpful, were difficult to understand, were overly strict and punitive, or who yelled or used excessive physical force to gain compliance:

> "She was an Indian and she couldn't speak English properly and she couldn't write, like we couldn't understand her language and writing. Science was just a bit hard for me, too. It didn't help with her being the science teacher." (Terry)

Unlike several boys who reported being manhandled by male teachers, none of the girls reported physical abuse, although one girl's story illustrated how public humiliation during assembly could alienate a student, and Siara experienced what she perceived was ongoing emotional abuse from a female teacher that she had for over two years in high school:

> "I'd just sit there and draw. Stick to my room, sit there, tag on my book or something. Just ignore her. And she'd always do things which excluded me, you know, oh no, it's Siara, go away, or hang on, here's Siara, let's give her a detention … I took it. After a while I didn't care. I tried to be transferred to different classes but they wouldn't let me."

Several boys talked about incidents that could be interpreted as corporal punishment:

> "We used to get a smack on the bottom with ah, this was the first time at school, smack on the bottom with a fly, fly smacker. [She] used to smack us. It sat up on the computer." (Lee)

A few of the male participants also shared stories that were indicative of subversive, physical aggression being used by teachers to gain compliance or to punish troublesome behaviour:

> "At high school I was being real naughty one day, he grabbed my undies and wedgied me." (Robbie)

> "I like PE, but this guy's a psycho. One day he tried to strangle me. Because we'd just finished the beep test and then he sent me, we all had to do push-ups and I said no, I couldn't be bothered, and he grabbed me around my neck and tried to choke me."

According to the participants, the fear of a teacher's anger, the lack of support from school management and the threat of ongoing punishment created a hostile environment that provoked their own aggressive response. The excessive use of what the young people saw as management-condoned punishments, including being shouted at, harassed for misdemeanours, long periods spent in time out, and zero-tolerance policies such as stand-downs, were also traumatic for the young people, particularly the boys.

## Their Role in School

Friendships played a major role in the school life-world of the participants, and it soon became evident in their stories that rather than being rejected by pro-social peers and left with little alternative but to mix with, and be negatively influenced by, their antisocial peers, it was the participants who rejected their pro-social peers, seeking out friends who shared similar interests such as cigarette smoking, truanting, drinking alcohol and using drugs at school.

These relationships with antisocial peers proved to be particularly toxic for the female participants, who attached themselves to older or same-age boys at school, not as boyfriend and girlfriend but as role models – people they wanted to be like:

> "That's where I got my cheeky mouth from, my intermediate. My boy mates. If a girl would get smart to us, I'd … say something real stupid, but we all thought it was funny, so I'd just get real cheeky. So I was so used to, you know, just not being scared of girls at all, you know. I was like if you want a fight, bring it on." (Siara)

> "I like basketball and rugby. Because like, in school I don't, I don't hang around with girls. Cause I'm used to hanging around with heaps of boys." (Sina)

Sporting and academic achievement at school has been identified as a protective factor for youth offending, primarily because success within the educational arena is considered to strengthen the attachment to school. Several of the young people achieved success in school sports:

> "I got quite a lot of awards from school. Mostly for P.E.; sports. I love sport. That's my best. That's my goal, to be a rugby player." (Albert)

However, like attachment to positive teachers and friendships with pro-social friends, participating in sports was not sufficient to stop the young person from serious offending. This may be because participation and success in school sports is only a protective factor when connected with some other component, such as a supportive home environment and a parent or parents who actively encourage pro-social activities.

It is also possible that academic rather than sporting achievement is a stronger protective factor against – or, conversely, a lack of academic success due to severe behavioural problems is a more accurate predictor of – criminal offending. None of the participants reported gaining success in any external or significant school examinations and several connected underachieving academically and their behavioural problems at school, although there was some confusion as to whether their behaviour caused them to underachieve or their lack of ability led to their antisocial behaviour:

> "When I nearly got kicked out of school they realised I couldn't do the work. I had dyslexia or whatever they call it. Because I wasn't doing work and I was getting into trouble at school." (Nick)

Some participants reported having learning difficulties, but most of these attributed their lack of academic success on a "disability". Thom explained:

> "I don't really like writing. I can't write like good. I tried but it's just something I can't do. I think it's just another one of my disabilities." (Thom)

Nick blamed his lack of academic achievement on inadequate teachers:

> "Teachers just don't know what they're doing. Yeah, at high school, they just don't have no idea what they're doing. They don't know how to teach properly. Screaming at the top of your lungs, just getting other people's attention and if you say you don't know how to do the work they … just kick us out of the class … They never taught me anything at high school. That was the worst school I ever went to."

## Moral Reasoning

This blaming of others rather than taking responsibility for their own behaviours permeated the participants' stories. It was their perception that they were victims of an unfair system and therefore were justified in breaking the school rules. All antisocial behaviours exhibited in school by the participants had an explanation. For example, unlike bullying or physical aggression, fighting was just playing, done in self-defence or to gain or maintain a place in the social hierarchy. Poto saw fighting at school as a leisure activity:

> "Lunch times. Oh I used to just play, just going off for games, or probably get into fights. Mostly fights or, lunch times I, missed, missed those days … Got expelled cause I just, too much fighting."

Bullying was retaliation for perceived insults, or because they had been bullied in the past, or their victims deserved it because of their diversity or relationship with teachers:

> "I used to pick on Chinese, um Indians … because they would get smart to me and they would come to school like, wear this bandanna or something, on their head." (Poto)

> "I just beat them up. Cause they're ugly [or] because they're teacher's pet, a teacher's pet. Someone that licks the teacher's bum." (Ford)

Physical aggression and assaults were blamed on their own anger and frustrations. Smoking, drinking alcohol and using drugs in school was acceptable because it was part of their "out-of-school" life-world; they resented the expectation that they should act in a different way, be different people from who they were in their home setting:

> "When I was 10 I still kept taking it [drugs] at school. I don't stop things when I go to school. I'm not like, I'm one person here and then I'm one person at school. I'm always the same person." (Georgie)

Despite contrary evidence that taking drugs contributes to academic and behavioural problems, the young people claimed that it relaxed them, made them more compliant, and therefore better students in the classroom:

> "Sometimes when I was taking dope it made school more better for me. It would calm me down, and I'd just sit by myself and talk to no one and do my work. I'd rather get stoned than do my work and go in straight, because I'm all hyped." (Wayne)

They saw vandalism of school property as a way of venting anger, a method of communicating among like-minded adolescents, or a form of social currency that provided the young person with an identity and status among his or her peers:

> "Tag to get famous. To make memories. Like if you go somewhere, you just take a nap there and then you go out and we just do that, people that have been here and all of that … it just goes around and all that, and when you meet … you'll go, and you'll meet them and they'll go, 'Ohh, what's your name?' and we say our tag. Because we, because every time we introduce our names, we introduce by our tag, and they go, 'Ahh, I've seen, I've seen your tag,' like that." (Sina)

## Their Ideal School

If the young people had the power in the school they would primarily focus on supporting students who have difficulty with their learning. They would achieve this by employing teachers whom the students can understand and respect, provide more meaningful subjects, offer more opportunities for success, put incentives in place to motivate the reluctant learner, and alter the teaching styles of teachers so that they are more compatible with the learning styles of struggling students. They would encourage and support teachers to design more interesting lessons, allow students to work in groups, have more time to share with friends, and put fun back into the classroom. Having established positive and inviting learning environments, some of the participants believe that this would reduce the behavioural problems in school, including the use of drugs. In response to the "magic wand" question, Nick became very animated:

> "Oh, I'd do heaps. I'd change the classrooms, change the way the teachers teach, just always be there when someone's in trouble and tell them to keep on doing, I don't know, good things. I hope they'll do their best because I hate to see them stop their work and doing drugs at school."

While recognising the need for a disciplinary process, they would improve the detention system so that it is fairer as well as being more productive and meaningful. To reduce

stealing and bullying in school they would meet the economic needs of their students, providing food at appropriate times and offering monetary incentives to reduce the effects of socio-economic inequality. They also suggested reducing the cultural gap between family and school values by increasing the line of communication between home and school.

Safety in school was a concern for some of the participants. Elle recommended the designation of "safe areas" within the school grounds that are closely monitored by adults, not only during unsupervised lunch and interval breaks but also for students who are sent to, or require, "time out" so they can calm down:

> "I would have an area for the um, the handicaps and the people that got picked on so that they wouldn't get picked on and they would be alright at school."

The changes the participants would make to their children's school were similar to what they would implement for themselves. Because the majority want their children to experience academic success within the education system, and they perceive this to be achieved through effective staff, they would focus on the teachers. The teachers they would select for their children would be kind, committed adults who are good role models, trustworthy, sensitive to their children's needs, have no preconceived prejudices, and who treat all students equally. They also wanted teachers who offered diverse teaching styles that would complement their children's learning styles, and teachers who communicated in ways the children could understand.

## DISCUSSION

Although a positive bond with a teacher can act as a protective factor for at-risk children (Sprott et al. 2000), there was no evidence in this study to suggest that attachment to a teacher reduced or even paused the antisocial behaviour of the young person on the developmental trajectory towards criminal offending. The participants' stories indicated that the primary benefits of teacher attachment for the young person at high risk of offending was a temporary increase in self-esteem, a higher level of academic achievement than might otherwise have been mastered, and positive stories of the school experience to share with their own children which might help them to make the transition into the school system.

Many of the participants' memories of their school experience involved negative incidents with school personnel. Frequently punished for their behaviours, the young people perceived they were unfairly treated by individual teachers and by the school's senior management team. It became apparent that this sense of "unfairness" extended to the expectation that they attend school. Forced to be educated against their will, they were offered what to them were meaningless subjects that had no relevance to their real life-world. The imposition of compulsory attendance was aggravated by a lack of academic success, having to mix with peers they could not relate to, and having teachers they perceived had authority over them. These feelings of victimisation grew to become an energising force that they used to fuel their escape from the compulsory school system, justifying their acts of non-compliance, verbal and physical aggression, truancy and use of illegal drugs. The school system – under-resourced and ill-equipped to tolerate severe, often aggressive behaviours that disrupt the learning process and endanger teachers and other students – applies zero-tolerance policies that include stand-downs, suspension, exclusion and expulsion. Freed from the obligation to attend school, the ejected students turn to their out-of-school community, rejoining other disenchanted, antisocial peers and family. With no legitimate means to satisfy their needs,

these youth, many of whom are already involved in criminal activity, continue on their pathway towards serious offending.

It became apparent as I listened to their stories that the participants brought pre-existing risk factors into the school environment with them. These included conflicting values and expectations between the home and school environment, poor parenting, historical physical and/or emotional abuse, family relationship problems, antisocial peer relationships, and other out-of-school traumatic experiences. Many had been raised in lower socio-economic neighbourhoods, and the majority, who were Māori and second-generation Pacific people, carried the negative effects of what Ogbu (1991) describes as "involuntary minority ethnic status".[4] When these children with multiple, complex problems enter the school system, they are exposed to the school-based risk factors. Although a negative school experience does not cause a young person to commit crimes, the cumulative effect of negative school experiences advance an already vulnerable young person towards truancy and school dropout, which have been identified as major risk factors for youth offending.

Given the emotion demonstrated as the participants told their stories, the effects of negative school experiences do not diminish with consequences or time; instead, they fester inside the young person, with each traumatic experience adding to existing feelings of resentment, frustration and anger. Repeated throughout their stories are feelings of boredom, unfairness, humiliation and favouritism; excessive use of physical force; being yelled at, harassed and misunderstood; and racism. As each additional injurious event is added to the student's portfolio of negative school experiences, the damage accumulates and feelings of hostility intensify until the student is completely alienated from the school system. It is this sense of alienation, sometimes accompanied by a final confrontation with an adult, that gives the young person the opportunity to break the imposed umbilical cord between him or her and the compulsory school system. Some adolescents walk away from the educational system while others require a volatile altercation. If the ensuing explosive outburst does not result in the desired indefinite stand-down or exclusion, the student keeps repeating the process until it has the desired effect. I refer to this as the "tsunami effect".

### The "Tsunami Effect"

The first and most crucial wave of the "tsunami effect" is the foundation of critical risk factors the child brings to the school setting: familial risk factors, low socio-economic status, involuntary minority ethnic status, and association with criminally minded friends and associates. Added to and entwined with the pre-existing risk factors is the second wave: the negative school experiences that fester and build up resentment, frustration and anger in the young person. These may include a negative transition into a new school; a detrimental, despondent school climate; academic failure with few opportunities to achieve success; anti-social friendships formed at school; negative student–teacher relationships; deliberate or unintentional mistreatment by school personnel; and excessive use of punitive disciplinarian practices.

The "tsunami effect" is not an invisible process: symptoms of the young person's alienation from the school system become apparent through their attitude towards school and school personnel, and the problematic behaviours they display within the school setting, including

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[4] Involuntary minorities, Ogbu contends, are people who are brought to a society against their will, unlike voluntary immigrants who willingly enter a country with the option of returning to their homeland.

persistent expressions of boredom and hostility towards teachers, increased truanting, and substance abuse during school hours. The degree of a student's reaction to minor disciplinary consequences may also be an indicator of the scale of their alienation from school, as is the lengths they will go to avoid being apprehended when truanting from school. What became apparent through the young people's stories was that the less they cared about being caught by school personnel, the greater their alienation from the school system. What was also revealed was the positive influence that some teachers had on the participants' school experience. Teachers who took the time to explain things to them, who cared about their wellbeing, who spoke a common language and demonstrated a mutual respect were remembered with affection.

## CONCLUSION

Through the stories of young people convicted or on remand for serious offences, the research set out to identify the risk factors, if any, the compulsory school experience contributes to the pathway to youth offending. The findings show that the majority of the participants exhibited severe, aggressive behaviours in the school setting and carried negative memories of their compulsory educational experience from an early age. Although there was no evidence to suggest that the school experience influences a young person to offend, it is possible that an accumulation of negative school experiences exacerbates pre-existing risk factors that place a vulnerable young person on the pathway to criminal offending. What also emerged was the unique opportunity that schools provide to identify children who are most at risk of serious offending.

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