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Making a claim for services: 
Supporting vulnerable young people’s engagement with services

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work at Massey University, Manawatu, New Zealand

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2015
Abstract
This thesis examined vulnerable young people’s experiences of becoming involved with services. Through analysing first-person accounts shared by youth and parents/caregivers in qualitative interviews, it sought to examine the process by which youth become fully engaged with services. The thesis had a particular interest in examining the barriers and the factors that facilitated young people’s engagement with services. The youth had complex needs and were involved with more than one service. These services included child welfare, youth justice, alternative and specialised education, and mental health services.

The concept of making a claim for services emerged from the analysis as an explanatory device that captured the process of service engagement. Young people’s engagement with services was a complex, on-going process that was shaped by a range of factors. Making a claim was a critical first step in young people’s engagement. It represented an on-going, interactive process between clients and service providers of developing an understanding of client needs, what help services could offer, and what a meaningful and relevant service response would entail. There were three key factors in making a claim for services: first, young people’s needs and service entry criteria; second, opportunities for youth and their parents/caregivers to exercise personal agency in the help-seeking process; and third, relevant and meaningful service responses.

The findings of this thesis have implications for all service providers working with vulnerable youth. This thesis indicated that service engagement is an on-going process that is shaped by a range of factors. The youth in the thesis had to navigate a range of challenging contexts, for example at home, at school, and in their relationships with others. Service providers working with vulnerable youth need to ensure that they consider the contextual factors that influence young people’s engagement with services and work to foster supportive and empowering relationships with youth and their family/whānau. Training for service providers, both through tertiary institutions and in-post training, could support the development of this area of practice.
Acknowledgements

I first want to acknowledge the youth and the parents/caregivers who gave their time to the Pathways Study. Without them, this thesis could not have been undertaken.

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the on-going support and guidance of my supervisors, Professor Dr Jackie Sanders and Professor Dr Robyn Munford. Thank you for encouraging me to keep going, guiding me in my thinking and writing, supporting me through challenging times and celebrating with me when things went well.

Anton, thank you for being a supportive partner over the past few years; you have been my rock. Thank you for having so much patience with me and for inspiring me to keep going when I faltered. Thank you for believing in me. Thanks also to my family for all their support and encouragement. Mum and Dad, thank you for instilling in me a love of learning. I wouldn’t be where I am today without you. Hayden and Sarah, thanks for helping me to laugh. Thank you to Wim, Inger, Ralph, Stefan, Sanne and Hayley for encouraging me and taking an interest in my work.

I also want to thank my colleagues, particularly Wa and Sheryl. You have supported me in so many ways. Thanks for the debriefs and for listening to my study complaints. Thanks, too, to my friend Sarah for being a confidante, giver of advice and perspective, and all-round supportive person. Thank you for reading this thesis and offering me your feedback.
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