

# Where are they now?

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*An inquiry into the impact of the MYPLC Teen Parent Unit on the lives of the young parents and their children in the years since they exited (2012-2016).*

**2017 Senior Manager's Sabbatical Report (Term 3)**

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## **Where are they now?**

This sabbatical inquiry focused on the ways Murihiku Young Parents Learning Centre (MYPLC) impacted on the lives of the young mothers, their children and how they perceived MYPLC supported them as learners, parents and individuals.

The inquiry involved a literature review looking at teenage motherhood in New Zealand from an educational, health and social development perspective. A qualitative method using semi-structured interviews was used to document the experiences of six teenage mothers who attended MYPLC between 2012 and 2016. The interview guide contained themes about their levels of self-efficacy before and after their time at MYPLC, their perceptions about how MYPLC equipped them to develop and meet their goals and to identify gaps in that support. The interviews also sought to identify patterns of behaviour, levels of resilience and if their experience at MYPLC helped to bring about positive changes in their lives and in the lives of their children.

Baseline data was collected for each of the young mothers who agreed to participate including demographics, qualifications gained at MYPLC, student identified career goals and self-identified destinations on entering. The participants chose the time and place of the interview and with their consent the interviews were audio recorded. The participants are identified by pseudonyms and references to other people and places have been removed to preserve anonymity.

### **Baseline Data**

Each student spent a minimum of two years at the centre. Two students identify as Maori and four as Pakeha. Three were 16 on entry and three were 17. Three had come directly from local secondary schools, one had 'dropped out' at 15, one was working and one was doing a course through a WINZ provider. One was flatting on her own, one lived with her mother and sibling, one lived with her partner's parents, one lived with her partner at her mother's house, one lived with her partner's parents and one was transient.

All students entered with at least some credits towards level 1 and one had gained level 2. However, all students had significant gaps in their learning.

## Background

MYPLC is a Teen Parent Unit (TPU) which opened in January 2011. It was the third TPU to open in the South Island, the other two being in Christchurch, and its establishment received a high level of support from Southland Secondary Schools and the community.

Since its inception, I have given numerous presentations to many groups and organizations in our wider community and one of the most frequently asked questions is, "What are the young people doing now?", the implication being, did the time spent at MYPLC improve the outcomes for them and their children.

This sabbatical provided the opportunity to find out the answers to that question by talking with some of the young parents who had attended MYPLC. It also gave me the time to step back and reflect on how TPUs in general and MYPLC in particular can impact on these young parents lives and how we as a society view teen pregnancy and parenting. It has resulted in informing the MYPLC team what actions we need to take to ensure our learning programme remains relevant and responsive to the needs of current and future teenagers who attend MYPLC.

## Teenage motherhood in New Zealand - Who are they?

The literature on teenage motherhood is extensive and New Zealand's high record of teenage birth rates in the OECD (second only to the U.S) is well documented, Families Commission (2011). Much of the literature focuses on the risks for mothers and children and much of it reports negative outcomes, such as, poor education and economic long term outcomes for mothers and their children.

A recent study however, by the Ministry of Social Development, reports that it is "likely that teenage mothers are from a selected sample of the population who would have had poorer outcomes even if they delayed child-birth beyond their teenage years" (MSD, 2017, p.8) There is a growing body of qualitative research where, "young mothers, using their own voice see themselves as making a success of their lives in a variety of ways" (Wilson, 2006, p.65). Moreover, Wilson found that for many young women, having a baby can provoke positive changes, such as getting off drugs and alcohol, reconnecting with their families and developing a sense of direction and purpose (Ibid p.65)

*"I didn't give up because.... I couldn't...I can't...If you give up it's not a good example for your babies - they need to see that your parents can do stuff...It has to be a story you can tell them when they're older of what you've achieved and how far you came...when people say that*

*Teen pregnancy stops you from doing everything, I can say, well no. I had you at 16 and I still became what I wanted to be in the end.”-Amber.*

The overwhelming emotions felt by the young women when they learned of their pregnancy were fear, confusion, anxiety and stress.

*“I was confused, unsettled and stressed that I was a young mum and I didn’t have anything or anywhere safe or settled for him.” – Lily.*

They also felt they didn’t know where to find support and they felt judged.

*“I felt judged by everyone and even the hospital nurses looked down on me.” – Maria.*

Their experiences at school had not been positive for a variety of reasons including, feeling bullied, unable to focus, feelings of exclusion and disconnection.

*“School had been terrible...I couldn’t focus in that environment...I had friends who led me into bad things ....and I couldn’t sit in a classroom.” – Jane.*

All of them were unconfident as learners and some saw themselves as naughty or rebels.

*“I didn’t pay much attention at school. I was the clown of the class.” – Lily.*

*“I felt bullied and excluded at school. I didn’t talk much. I had dyslexia and I think that affected my speech problems.” – Kylie.*

*“School wasn’t very good – I was quite the rebel. I quit when I was 15 turning 16. This was before I got pregnant. Learning wasn’t really important in my eyes. I truanted a lot.... Primary school had been good but there was quite a lot of moving. I was turned off school because it was just a stage...by the time I realised it was too late...I was pregnant so I had to change.” – Amber.*

Their experiences reflect the findings from the Families Commission overview of teenage pregnancy and parenting, who noted that young women who were disengaged from schooling

prior to the birth of their children were more likely to struggle to maintain engagement with school once the child was born. “Inflexible school policies and procedures, a lack of adequate childcare and other practical difficulties make continuing education in mainstream schools very difficult.” (Families Commission, 2011, p.15) This inquiry however, found that a common thread running through the young women’s narratives were that they felt unmotivated and disengaged in their learning and disconnected with school, before they became pregnant.

TPUs like MYPLC are a unique intervention in New Zealand where some teenage parents have the opportunity to receive second chance learning. According to the Education Review Office (ERO) “Young parents are a diverse student group who face challenges additional to those experienced by other young people in education...” (ERO, 2014, p.4). They cite these challenges as being associated with pregnancy and parenting, including “having dedicated time for pregnancy, birthing, the care of infants and the costs associated with family living”(Ibid p.4) They also note that a high proportion of teen parents come from “at risk backgrounds and experience on-going challenges connected to family violence, drugs, alcohol and poverty” They describe a TPU’s purpose as being “To provide education for teenage students who are pregnant, or are parents, in an environment that supports them in their roles as both learners and parents” (ERO, 2011, p.1)

Furthermore, Hinden-Miller (2012) emphasises the need for TPUs to offer a qualitatively different experience for students, arguing that the educational experience needs to be appreciably different from mainstream schooling. This inquiry explores some strategies that MYPLC has employed particularly around developing self-efficacy and building resilience.

### Teen Parents as learners – Developing self-efficacy

During the MYPLC enrolment process students are asked to describe themselves as learners and to identify their areas of strength and weaknesses. Invariably most students describe themselves as either being ‘dumb’ or ‘average’ or ‘I can’t do Maths or English’ or, a subject as being easy or hard, or just simply ‘I wasn’t any good at school’, but can’t define why. This was also the case with the young women interviewed for this study.

Psychology professor, Carol Dweck states that there are two types of mind-set; a fixed mind-set, which dictates that our ability to achieve is unchangeable, and a growth mind-set, which

says that we can improve our abilities through challenging work and practice. In her book ‘Mind-set’ (2006), Dweck argues that students stop following their natural desire to learn because they become afraid of not being ‘smart’ and develop a fixed mind-set which hinders their ability to challenge things. She believes that people with fixed mind-sets respond to failure negatively (apathy, blaming others, making excuses, depression) because they do not believe they are able to change their situation. Growth mind-set, on the other hand, thrives on persistence, hard work and on openness to criticism in order to help us to achieve.

<b>Fixed Mind-set</b>	<b>Growth Mind-set</b>
Intelligence is static	Intelligence can be developed
Leads to a desire to look smart and therefore a tendency to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid challenges</li> <li>• Give up easily due to obstacles</li> <li>• See effort as fruitless</li> <li>• Ignore useful feedback</li> <li>• Be threatened by others success</li> </ul>	Leads to a desire to learn and therefore a tendency to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embrace challenges</li> <li>• Persist despite obstacles</li> <li>• See effort as a path to mastery</li> <li>• Learn from criticism</li> <li>• Be inspired by others success</li> </ul>
Dweck (2006) Mind-set: The new Psychology of Success. para. 1	

The young women interviewed here, had gained insights about themselves as learners and could identify strategies that they believed helped them as learners during their time at MYPLC. They spoke of how they benefitted from the personalised learning and how this helped them to become more confident, independent learners.

*“I had opportunities to learn the way I knew I could learn...I learnt to trust the feedback they gave me and not to get discouraged. I learnt to trust myself.” – Jane.*

One student who is now in her first year of a University College of Education programme, said she felt better equipped to undertake study at a tertiary level because she had been given the opportunity to do an ‘Introduction to Tertiary skills’ paper during her final year at MYPLC. She said that this helped her to understand how to format reports and essays and how to document sources.

*“It helped me to feel more confident about what I was capable of, at a time when I was anxious and nervous about meeting other University students.” – Amber.*

They also learnt the value of perseverance and not to give up.

*“When I came, I didn’t have any goals...I wanted to get my levels at Excellence and Merits because I didn’t get any at school...but I was just expecting them to be handed to me...At times when I wanted to give up I was made not to give up, well not made, but I was supported not to give up...so that when it got harder I just kept trying. Now I don’t stop until its finished...I keep digging and digging until I find what I need.” – Lily.*

Self-efficacy has long been understood to be a highly effective predictor of students’ motivation and learning. “It is the core belief that one has the power to produce desired effects by one’s actions, otherwise one has little incentive to act or persevere in the face of difficulties” Bandura, 1997, as cited in (Zimmerman, 2000, p.83).

Most of the young people who enrol at MYPLC come with a fixed mind-set. They believe that their success, or otherwise at school, depends on their innate talents or ability. It is clear however, that there were many other factors other than ability that determined whether they would feel they could be successful learners. For example, if they had learned to avoid or face challenges. Persist or withdraw in the face of difficulty. More importantly, regardless of innate ability, did they feel supported to develop and use their skills effectively and feel supported to achieve?

Strategies explicitly practised by MYPLC teachers help to maintain student’s adaptive self-efficacy and insights. These include: goal setting, role modelling or finding models with whom they can attain their goal, feedback that reveals progress in relation to their goals, personalised learning and tailored instruction to their academic capabilities and goals.

*“They knew my goals and helped me to do everything towards my career...so I took papers through SIT as well as level 3 Science papers” – Maria.*

*“The goal setting helped me with an objective that I had to get to – and I was prepared to do the learning, so I could meet these goals. The Learning Journal helped me to keep track of where I was at and what I was doing so I could pick up where I left off, I used to write little notes to myself.” – Jane.*

*“We did a lot of independent work...you just make a goal, even if it’s just for the week, well that’s what we did, evaluate it at the end of the week and if you achieve it, that’s your reward – that’s why you keep on going.” – Amber.*

They spoke how the learning environment at MYPLC helped them to focus and to learn strategies that promoted independence and self-regulation.

*“The Learning Journals and feedback helped me to see what I had to do to improve as I went on...and no one gave up on me” – Kylie.*

*“There was a lot of time and patience for me – it was like a small family where the teachers cared about what you were learning.” – Brooke.*

*“They weren’t just teachers; they were like family.” – Kylie.*

### Teenagers as parents – Developing resilience

As with self-efficacy, there are multiple bodies of literature that contribute to our understanding of resilience. The factors known to be associated with resilience, sit comfortably within the growth mind-set framework. Collin’s study (2010) looks at teenage mothers from a resilience perspective, which implies a focus on competencies and positive outcomes rather than on negative ones. She identifies these factors as; being motivated, taking responsibility, having goals, aspirations and pride in achievements, using insights into [their] past as a means of looking forward, having a strong sense of identity and seeing their lives in a wider context (Collins, 2010).

Collins defines resilience as referring to “positive outcomes in the presence of adversity...it ‘surfaces’ in the face of hardship (Hawley, 2010, p.102) and denotes the ability of individuals who are able to bounce back from adversity. As Hawley (ibid) notes, ‘Without struggle, resilience does not exist’” (Collins, 2010, p.6)



She found that many of the participants in her study defied stereotypes of teenage mothers, and that they developed skills and competencies that supported resilience. Collins summarises five studies which identify the range of negative outcomes for teenage mothers and their children across a large number of domains. For example, socio-economic deprivation, benefit dependent, lower education and literacy, less social support from friends, whanau and the baby's dad and more likely to have mental health and substance abuse problems (Collins, 2010). The literature clearly outlines the risk factors associated with teenage parents and parenting, but her study demonstrated that these factors can be mitigated and teenage mothers can be protected from disadvantage, or overcome disadvantage if they are supported to develop resiliency.

Frydenberg (2017) writes that evidence based on approaches such as mind-set, grit, emotional intelligence, and hardiness contribute to our understanding of resilience. When these approaches are underpinned by a positive psychological orientation, they combine to become a powerful tool for building resilience in different ways, in diverse contexts, throughout the lifespan. Similarly, Resnick (2000) talks about the need for a solution based perspective and that there needs to be a philosophical commitment to seeing young people as 'resources to be developed' instead of problems to be solved (Resnick, 2000, as cited in Collins, 2010).

The MYPLC vision to: *develop a strong self-belief enabling success as independent learners, empowering students to be positive parents*, encompasses this philosophy and our learning programme is individualised, responsive, personalised and flexible. It is within this framework that we work to build protective individual and social support factors around every student in order to build resilience. Factors that we know help students develop independence include: developing insight, having the ability to ask tough questions about themselves and others and their situations to help problem solve, the ability to distance oneself from trouble and sometimes the pressures of family, friends and circumstances. Morality – what is the right thing to do? and having a sense of being a good/kind person. Having a sense of personal and collective identity or purpose, and having a sense of belonging (Unger et al, 2007, as cited in Collins, 2010).

One study which specifically focused on resilience in teen mothers noted that a 'rebellious determination to prove she was not doomed to failure'. (Carey et al, 1998, cited in Collins,

2010) was among the characteristics of those who had overcome adversity. The research also points out that fostering resilience requires increasing the number of ‘positive chain reactions’, so that success in one area enhances self-esteem, self-efficacy and confidence in rising to new challenges (Collins, 2010).

The holistic nature of learning at MYPLC cannot be overstated; the on-site childcare, flexible timetables, one-on-one and small group teaching, the ability to play an active role in decisions about their education, and the practical and emotional support provided are crucial to these young mothers succeeding as learners and parents.

All the young mothers in this inquiry acknowledged the importance of having access to an Early Childcare Centre (ECC) on the same site as the TPU. Each of the young mothers developed strong connections with at least one of the Early Childhood teachers and in two cases this relationship helped them to decide to become Early Childhood teachers themselves. One student is due to graduate this year and one is now in her first year of a Bachelor of Education teaching degree. The young mothers felt they were supported as parents and all of them felt the balance was right between their own learning and parenting. They enjoyed the flexibility of being able to spend time with baby at the centre.

*“I feel like I had loads of support as a parent, with the ECC being right next door, that’s what made me think about being an Early Childhood teacher. Spending time with them and talking to them, especially the ones working with the babies. I felt like I had enough time with my baby – I could keep up with my studies and spend time at the centre. I liked the idea of being educated alongside the children.” – Brooke.*

*“It was good knowing that our children weren’t very far away...I felt comfortable asking questions about the children’s milestones. It was a safe environment to talk about things as parents.” – Amber.*

They also valued the support from outside agencies such as regular visits from Plunket, Family Works, the Health Nurse, especially when they developed relationships within these agencies.

*“When I had H... I had nothing but MYPLC so I felt like things were going to be OK – like all the support groups we had like, budgeting and parenting groups. If it wasn’t for*

*that I probably wouldn't be an adult mum today. I wouldn't be able to live on my own. It was good, everyone coming in back then, we didn't have cars and it made it a lot easier everyone coming in for appointments so we didn't have to take time out of our learning.” – Lily.*

Overwhelmingly the young mothers felt they belonged. Being with other young mums meant that they didn't feel like outliers as teenagers.

*“It was good to have other girls in my position and to have their support. It was good not to be judged. I felt I was judged at .... [School] so I didn't tell them I was pregnant. It was good being able to communicate with the Early Childhood teachers – they could understand coming from a young mother's perspective. And also when the Plunket nurse would come in and talk to us as a group – with all the girls. We could get our opinions across as well as get information.” – Maria.*

A major theme that emerges from the research (Rentschler 2003) is that of ‘transformed relationships’. Despite sometimes receiving positive attention from friends at the beginning of the pregnancy, many teen mums experience lost friendships, loneliness and decreased social activities. These teenagers found it more difficult to be a part of social activities that reflect normal teenage life.

Collins study, (2010) informs us that having positive experiences at school lead to the increased likelihood of effective social functioning in adulthood (Quinton & Rutter, 1988, Dumont and Provost, 1999, as cited in Collins, 2010). These positive experiences can include success in positions of responsibility, social and cultural activities, sports and teamwork. Positive experiences lead to a higher self-esteem and contribute to personal satisfaction and self-confidence which in turn builds resilience by providing resources to use against negative life events.

In responding to questions about how MYPLC helped them to develop qualities, attributes and skills around leadership and teamwork, the young parents pointed to the opportunities they received at MYPLC which they didn't think would have been available to them in mainstream education, not because it's not offered but because they felt they lacked confidence.

*“In my last year I had a leadership role – it brought me out of my comfort zone and gave me opportunities” – Maria.*

*“It helped me grow up, working with younger students. It gave me confidence to stand up in front of people.” – Lily.*

They also talked about their sense of belonging at MYPLC and the friendships and relationships they developed.

*“I felt I was able to express my opinion and that helped give me ownership – it helped me work with girls on the same level and it felt like a big group or family.” – Jane.*

*“I became more confident as a communicator – I wasn’t put down, I was encouraged by others, I made good friendships, I was listened to and I felt like I belonged.” – Kylie.*

Student forums encouraged students to develop coping and problem solving skills.

*“Everyone was going through the same challenges. Circle Net was a safe place to vent” – Lily.*

*“Circle Net was a good place to sort out conflict – it helped to resolve issues. It was good to get information about things and gave me a sense of belonging because everyone was treated equally. Everyone had a voice. I had good relationships with peers and teachers – there was lots of respect.” – Maria.*

*“At MYPLC I got the opportunity to be a leader. It has helped me throughout my time now at College. I can actually talk to people without having to feel nervous and anxious about what they’re thinking and I’ve made new friends. It helped my confidence being around the other students...you have to learn how to be with them...I felt a sense of belonging at MYPLC. Every day you walk through that door you feel like you’re welcomed in and surrounded by friends...If we had an opinion we could come and talk about it to teachers and also Circle Net, we could get our ideas across.” – Amber.*

*“We learnt about tolerance at MYPLC, things like understanding that people don’t always come from the same background as you...or think the same...respecting others”*  
– Amber.

### Transitioning out – Building a Bridge

Resilience is a crucial component to the skills and attributes that the young mothers need when transitioning from the relative safety of MYPLC into the adult world because it requires confidence and the belief that one has the skills for a job, further training, or entry into a tertiary institution. All of the participants in this study felt that though they had been well supported and prepared for life after school; they were though, able to point to the gaps in the programme.

All the students in this inquiry had gained a minimum of NCEA level 3 and one had gained U.E. Between them they had gained a range of work skill qualifications including: workplace first aid, liquor licence, barista skills and learner driver’s licence. Some had also completed some papers at tertiary level towards their specific career choice and two had completed a level 4 Certificate in Tertiary skills. All had opportunities in work experience placements, ranging from hospitality, administration, vet nursing, journalism, graphic design, teaching and care giving. Very often the value of the work experience was to confirm that they were not on the right career pathway.

*“I started off thinking I wanted to work in a restaurant...I had no idea I wanted to be a teacher”* – Amber.

*“I felt supported about changing career goals but I was all over the place...changed 3-4 times... teacher, hotel management, hospitality, bar work, social work and police...my goal now is the police force but I feel I can come back and they will keep helping me”* – Lily.

They acknowledged that these opportunities helped them to develop self-belief in their skills and confidence as young adults.

*“Work experience...best thing ever! It helped me to gain skills and courage”* – Jane.

*“I started believing in myself that I could do things if I put my mind to it”* – Amber.

They also talked about the careers programme and how it prepared them for work.

*“I prepared a C.V and learnt how to write cover letters” – Jane.*

*“I had to practise interview skills...and it taught me to be professional” – Amber.*

*“They helped me with my application process for college and my scholarship” – Brooke.*

*“I practised role playing with ...P... and this helped me to feel confident enough to go for my interview” – Kylie.*

The gaps they identified were more opportunities to role play effective interview techniques and more practice and exposure to professional behaviours and expectations. Some identified that they need more help, support and advice around childcare, student loans, requirements from WINZ but they all appreciate that they can come back to MYPLC for advice after they leave.

#### Where are they now?

Unger (2004, as cited in Collins, 2010) argues against the notion of resilience as an objective fact, noting what may be perceived as a risk factor in one circumstance, can be seen as a protective factor in another. In her literature review, Collins points to an increasing number of authors who challenge the extent to which teenage parenting is a risk (Collins, 2010). For example, Unger et al (2007) argued that for marginalised young people, resilience may come from contradicting social norms and finding ways to define and empower themselves through being very good at things that are not socially accepted (as cited in Collins, 2010, p.12).

The six young women interviewed for this study see themselves as successful. They are optimistic about the future for themselves and their children but they acknowledge how hard being a teenage parent has been. They are justifiably proud of themselves as parents and how far they have come.

Five have gone on to have a second child and three are in the same relationship they were in when they first became pregnant. All of their first born children are either at school or about to start. They are confident parents.

*“Full on! Family comes first. My children, my partner and whanau...A.... has nearly finished her first year at school... she just loves school; she loves reading...D...(Partner) is a huge support. He encourages me not to give up.” – Amber.*

*“I am very family orientated. We have two children now and feel in a stable position with T.... and me both working...T....is nearly finished his apprenticeship.” – Maria.*

*“We have two children and we’ve bought a house – we are so proud of our son...he is very bright...T...and I read to him from an early age.” – Brooke.*

Three have gone onto further study, two as Early Childhood teachers and one as a Primary Bi-cultural teacher. Two are employed, one as an administrator in a Real Estate company and one as a Caregiver (Both of these employment appointments came through their work experience opportunities at MYPLC). One is at home with a new baby, but is being mentored by a Policewoman. Policing being her career choice.

*“I’m happy, I’m alive, and I’ve got two happy, healthy kids.” – Lily.*

*“I’m financially independent – I have my own car, a place to live...I’ve got money...work is looking to give me a full-time contract and hopefully a full-time job in property management” – Jane.*

*“(Partner) is doing an apprenticeship...I work 50 hours a fortnight. It’s tough but we manage. I hope to start training as a Nurse within the next 5 years when .... starts school.” – Maria.*

All of these young mothers believed that the support they received while at MYPLC helped shaped them as young adults.

*“So much! I wouldn’t be the person I am without MYPLC.” – Jane.*

*“It wouldn’t have been possible for me to stay at school. Once I started MYPLC I didn’t feel so alone, I became motivated to finish school and see how far I could go.” – Maria.*

*It helped me grow up and mature...I wouldn’t be the person I am today. It taught me how to deal with situations and not to give up when times get tough – if one door closes another one opens.” – Lily.*

*“I became more confident. It supported me to become a good parent, gave me friends, my support...gave me the confidence to do what I want to do.” – Maria.*

It is very clear from talking to these young women that they all made a conscious decision to re-think their lives and potential futures when they became pregnant at 16 or 17. Sometimes they weren’t sure how they would do it, they were all scared, anxious and stressed, some had very little family support, and all had a little financial support. But, for them having a child was a motivator.

*“I see a lot of people like me who decided to go down the opposite road. I hate to think I could’ve gone down that road if I hadn’t made the decision to better myself.” – Amber.*

## **Findings: What are we doing? What do we need to do?**

### A sense of belonging

The concept of *whakawhanaungatanga* is key to establishing and maintaining the transformative nature of the culture at MYPLC. Each young woman who comes into MYPLC needs to be able to feel comfortable within her own skin and confident in her identity. Relationships need to develop and trust needs to be won. The concept of *ako* between teacher and learner must be at the forefront of our pedagogy. Decision making forums like ‘Circle Net’ offer opportunities for student voice and wherever possible these voices need to be heard and their ideas and opinions captured and implemented.



### Success breeds success

Students need to learn how to set goals that are personalised and meaningful so that they can experience progress and develop a sense of achievement. Feedback and feed forward must be specific and encourage them to embrace challenges and not give up. We must recognize that educational success is not achieved in isolation, educational success is instead just one aspect of successful well-being which enables competency in learning and in life. We need to maintain high expectations for our students; we need to believe in them and what they are capable of achieving. Their life experience as young mothers need to be accepted so they do not see themselves as outliers.

### Empowerment and Agency

As a learner: We must help students to understand that if they work hard and persist they can get better and that they have an active role to play in their learning. This means that they have choice in the subjects they take and that they are engaged and interested in their learning. The learning conversations in their learning journals is an important aspect of developing the notion that learning is on-going and they can take risks and failure is an indicator of learning.

As a parent: Parenting skills can be explicitly ‘taught’ but what is more effective are opportunities for information sharing facilitated by experts such as Plunket nurses and Early Childhood teachers. The young mothers also value the support, encouragement and advice from other young mothers. Fundamental to the support they receive as parents is the modelling they see from the Early Childhood teachers and the understanding that teachers will walk alongside them to guide and advise but also listen. The young mothers need to be encouraged in their agency as a parent; that they can influence and make a difference for their child. Who they are, and how they do things will make an impact on their child. They, as parents are agents of change.

### Pathways and Citizenship

What has become clear from this inquiry is that for the MYPLC student it is not just about getting credits. The MYPLC student must always be viewed holistically and the learning must be personalised and tailored to each young woman as an individual. Co-construction between

teacher and learner must be on-going, through student conferencing, academic interviews, reflection and review. We need to ensure we have pathways that open up their options so they can see themselves, and what is possible for them through a much broader lens.

## **So what?**

This inquiry helped point out the gaps in our programme. We need to consider how we are preparing these young women for their contribution beyond school when they are moving out into the world of work and/or tertiary. Unlike mainstream schools we are dealing with more than an adolescent; we are dealing with a young family. Again, the concept of *whakawhanaungatanga* is vital in building and maintaining the connection with them as mothers. This means we need to create and strengthen that bridge between secondary school and the workplace or tertiary. The challenge for us is to build community networks with industry providers and employers; develop modules and workshops which help students to become 'work ready', to develop professional skills and qualifications which will help them to get jobs, or go onto tertiary education. We need greater flexibility and access to providers who can help with this transition. Young parents need the security and stability of the TPU and ECC while they are transitioning. The biggest obstacle is losing these supports at a time when they are once more facing a huge challenge on their way to independence. Supports like childcare, advice and guidance and financial security need to be kept in place as they are transitioning into the wider world. Finally, it takes time. Time to build trust, to develop skills that build self-efficacy and resilience, and time for the young women to gain agency in their lives as parents.

## **Conclusion**

The young women who shared their stories here, expressed optimism and hope in the futures they are building for themselves and their children. Now, in their early 20s, it was sometimes difficult for them to look back at their 16-year-old selves but it was clear they had gained a great deal of insight into the experiences and influences that had shaped their lives. It would be fair to say though, when I first met them they lacked confidence, often felt stigmatized and judged and were fearful and anxious about what lay ahead, even though they were excited about the arrival of their child. What they all shared, however was a sense of determination, perseverance and a commitment to do what it took to 'turn their lives around'. In this way the

pregnancy acted as a catalyst and motivator and this helped them to be receptive to factors known to be associated with self-efficacy and resilience. The window of opportunity is often narrow so it is important that our programme remains relevant and responsive.

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