



## November 2015 Research Reflection

### Why We Need to Move Towards Youth Centred Services By Sarah McKay

Through my work as a youth health researcher and evaluator I often talk to young people about their perspectives of the services and programmes that they are involved with. The young people I talk to regularly challenge common assumptions that they don't want to be asked about or are unable to substantively contribute to decisions about issues that affect them. This has led me to reflect on the need to place young people at the centre of the development and delivery of services for them in New Zealand. Another way to think about this is to consider the impact of programmes and services that seek to work holistically with young people. This approach is reflected in a 2011 Education Review Office evaluation of Alternative Education in New Zealand. This report states that "one of the features of the work of the Alternative Education providers is their focus on many different aspects of students' lives and not just their academic success. The focus on the 'whole student' is not simply a philosophical approach, it is a necessity (ERO, 2011 pp 52)." This approach acknowledges that young people are not passive recipients of interventions. Each young person's unique context impacts on their experience of a programme. Young people also have agency in constructing their own experiences of programmes, this includes the strengths that they bring to the programme. This is reflected in the ERO evaluation which found that Alternative Education providers were successful when they addressed young people's social and personal issues, included young people's whanau and tailored learning to young people's needs and strengths. Yet as with many other areas in the youth sector Alternative Education has been chronically underfunded in New Zealand for many years, hampering provider's capability to ensure this kind of support for young people. This shows that better outcomes for young people in New Zealand requires more than just changes at the service provision level. The government has indicated that young people who are disengaged from education and employment will be an increasing priority for them. If they are serious about this they need to take a lead in policy and funding towards an approach that addresses the resources needed to provide holistic services that place the wellbeing of young people at the centre of the programmes that we provide for them.

Education Review Office (2011). *Alternative Education schools and providers education evaluation report*. Wellington, New Zealand: Author. <http://www.ero.govt.nz/National-Reports/Secondary-Schools-and-Alternative-Education-April-2011>