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# Successful young adults are asked – ‘In your experience, what builds confidence?’

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## Abstract

This article summarises the findings from Karen Fagan’s research (*Successful young adults are asked – In your experience, what builds confidence?* (2010)) in which focus group discussions explored young adults’ perceptions of the concept of ‘confidence’, and the ‘building of confidence’, both in themselves and in others. The research participants were Year 13 students attending a co-educational state high school in a provincial town of Aotearoa / New Zealand during 2009.

This article outlines core components of the research journey, including underpinning philosophies, the research methodology and the research design. Key findings are then highlighted, research limitations are noted, recommendations are made and the emergent definition of confidence is proposed, namely that ‘*confidence is knowing who you are, having pride in who you are (inside and out), and being able to portray who you are to others*’.

In the words of the sixth-century philosopher Lao-Tse:

If there is radiance in the soul, it will abound in the family  
If there is radiance in the family, it will be abundant in the community  
If there is radiance in the community, it will grow in the nation  
If there is radiance in the nation, the universe will flourish.  
(cited in Pransky and McMillan, 2009, p. 257).

## Introduction

To date much research on young people has focused on the problematic and dysfunctional in the hope of learning how to ‘avoid’, ‘protect from’ or perhaps ‘fix’, the undesirable (Miles, 2000, p.3). This focus on the potential for harm is arguably a lopsided and melodramatic approach to a young person’s journey towards adulthood. Disruptive and potentially harmful scenarios undoubtedly do exist, and researching these factors is essential (and can be insightful) when looking for guidance as social workers. However, an equally informative and strengths based approach is to focus on young people who are thriving, and explore the factors that have enabled those young people to succeed and experience a sense of wellbeing (Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003, p.170; Kay, 2008, p. 11; Liebenberg and Ungar, 2009).

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This research project was motivated by a genuine curiosity around 'confidence', and 'building confidence', from the perspective of young adults leaving high school with the aura of 'success' attached to them. How was this achieved? Recognising that life is not a level playing field, and that 'youth lifestyles ... do not operate independently of political and social change' (Miles, 2000, p.9) incited my curiosity even further.

This study comes from my belief that 'confidence' empowers young people to develop positive inter-personal relationships, engage constructively in the wider community, develop into affirming parents (thus impacting inter-generationally) and, on the whole, experience a positive life journey (McLaren, 2002, p. 8). Or, put another way, a low self-confidence can significantly hinder a young person as they transit into adulthood.

## **Philosophies underpinning this study**

### **An ecological framework**

The belief that individuals are positioned within the context of their wider environment has been 'a hallmark of social work since it emerged as a discipline' (Coady and Lehmann, 2008, p. 91) and is now taken for granted in the field of social work (Ungar, 2008, p. 17; Saleebey, 2002, p. 230). The ecological framework reflects this contextual analysis and is used not only to identify risks and strengths, but also to identify appropriate and achievable interventions (Coady and Lehmann, 2008, p. 91). As Callister, Didham and Kivi (2009) suggested, it is not just about who we want to be, 'the issue is also who other people will let us be' (p. 43).

This research used the ecological approach to provide the overall framework within which it drew on five other theories and models for guidance, namely social cognitive theory, psychosocial theory, resilience and strength based approaches, human capital theory, social capital theory and social cohesion theory. The inclusion of these theories and approaches enhanced the multi-dimensional considerations that guided this study, and encouraged an analysis that reflected on a range of perspectives.

### **Cultural contexts**

In this study three cultural contexts were made explicit. The first two were 'youth culture' and 'school culture' both of which the research participants shared. The third was ethnicity-based culture, and in particular, the ethnicity of Māori. The first reason for choosing this context is that 'for teenagers who are members of ethnic minorities, ethnic identity – a sense of ethnic group membership and attitudes and feelings associated with that membership – is central to the quest for identity' (Berk, 2005, p.593). The second reason relates to Māori being indigenous to Aotearoa/New Zealand, the context within which this research was based.

If we as an indigenous people can achieve attitudes of self-confidence with expectations of success, while at the same time retain our basic philosophies of aroha and manaakitanga then we will maintain our identity and be the stronger for it. The end result will be economic prosperity for Māori (Hook, 2006, p. 9).

## **Research methodology used in this study**

### **Interpretivist and constructivist**

This research was informed by interpretivist and constructivist ontology and an epistemological stance that 'sees social reality characterised by intersubjectivity and common

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meanings which need to be interpreted and understood' (Walliman, 2005, p.188). This study not only collected young adults' meanings and interpretations, but also played a part (via the reflexivity apparent in the focus group discussions) in creating shared understandings (Grace, 1998, p.115). An integral part of this reflexive process is an ethno-methodological belief that social life is not just 'described through language, but is actually created by language' (Williams and May, 1996, p. 77). Thus, through the process of conversation, young adults were not only sharing their meanings, understandings and interpretations, they were also constructing and refining them.

### **A focused ethnographic approach**

This research used a focused ethnographic approach in that it elicited information on a specific topic which was identified before the study commenced (Muecke, as cited in Morse, 1994). This study was based within the real life context of some 17- and 18-year olds (namely, within their high school and within their school-based peer group) as it endeavoured to 'understand, discover, describe, and interpret a way of life from the point of view of its participants' (O'Leary, 2005, p. 118). The research design utilised focus group discussions which encouraged interactive dialogue as the young people explored their perceptions, shared understandings, and interpretations of 'confidence' and the 'building of confidence'.

The focus of this study was to locate tendencies and patterns within a specific cultural context (namely Year 13 students attending a co-educational state high school within provincial Aotearoa / New Zealand) and within a specific point in time (Grace, 1998, p. 115; Walliman, 2005, p. 208). This stance evidences the influence of the ethnographic epistemology, and supported Pawson's (1999) suggestion that ethnographers have conceded 'there are multiple realities and their accounts are but one version among many' (p. 32). Thus, the findings were not presented as having varying degrees of 'universal truth', but rather they were presented as a representation of a variety of meanings, interpretations and perspectives (Chambers, 1997).

### **Research design**

In October 2009 the researcher approached the principals of four state co-educational high schools requesting permission to carry out a piece of research with their Year 13 students. Two of the four high school principals agreed to this request. Once consent by the principal was given, the students were identified and approached by a senior staff member from that school asking if they would like to participate in this research. The staff member was instructed to invite students who had been given a leadership role (for example, sports captain, kapa haka leader, prefect, cultural committee member) and/or had received an award at the end-of-year Senior Prizegiving ceremony (for example, an academic award, an award for citizenship, an award for best debater, and/or a sports-related award). The research data was collected via two focus group discussions at the end of the 2009 academic year. This timing was chosen in order to minimise the impact of power differentials between the staff and the students since it was after prize giving, and just before the students signed out of school for the last time. The focus group discussions were held during school time and on the school premises. All aspects of the research design were discussed with cultural advisors nominated by the participating schools before the focus group discussions occurred.

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Sixteen young adults were involved in the two focus group discussions. Six were male, 10 were female, five were aged 17, and 11 were aged 18. The self-identified ethnicities included five New Zealand European, two Pākeha, one Māori / Pākeha, one Māori / New Zealander, two Māori, two New Zealander, one Samoan, one Arabian and one British. The participants came from a wide range of family shapes and socio-economic circumstances. Written consent was required from the young adults before the focus group discussions occurred.

## **Themes that emerged in the research findings**

### **The feeling of 'confidence'**

In the literature review the concept of 'confidence' was associated with the feeling words of 'trust', 'freedom from doubt', 'control', 'toleration', and 'self-belief' (Pearsall, 1998; Cotterell, Lowe and Shaw, 2006; Aoina, 2006; Craig, 2007; Merton, 1968, cited in Judge and Hurst, 2008). In contrast, the participants in this study linked 'confidence' with the feeling words of 'comfortable', 'warm', 'happy', 'self-love', 'complete', 'proud' and 'special'. On the surface these feeling words appear more relaxed, more centred within the individual and less relational to others than those identified in the literature. An assumption that underpinned the research question was that being in a leadership role and / or being identified as being 'successful' (both of which are relational) in a school-based context provided explicit indicators of confidence. While these indicators may be relevant, they were not at the top of the list from the perspective of the young adults. For them indicators of confidence were less publicly identifiable, and included things like having a clear sense of direction, positive core self-evaluations (including self-belief), self-awareness and competent interpersonal communication skills. As one young adult put it, 'I think being able to stand up for what you believe in, like, that's a huge thing with confidence, especially when, like, peer pressure ... where if you were the person who had different values or whatever, that you can still stand up for those values'.

### **'Building confidence' – social cognitive processes**

A few of the participants could not remember a time when they did not have confidence. It seemed for them 'confidence' was embedded earlier on in their developmental journey, and from this came a cycle, or perhaps a trajectory of 'confidence building' (Heaven, 2001; Cobb, 2007). However, a general theme emerged suggesting that social cognitive processes (Bandura, 1986) played a huge part in building confidence. It seemed that an internal voice which came from a positioning of self-belief enhanced confidence as the young adults perceived, interpreted and responded to the world around them. These positive core self-evaluations empowered them to take advantage of (and seek out) a wide range of opportunities driven not only by their desire to experience success, but also with the conscious aim of gaining further insight and clarity around personal abilities and interests, and as a mechanism for socialisation. Increasing social capital (Colic-Peisker and Walker, 2003) enhanced their ability to 'capitalize' (Judge and Hurst, 2007, p.1212) on situations by capturing benefits beyond the initial possibilities, which in turn fuelled a sense of self determination and empowerment. An interesting revelation was that many of the young adults proactively and consciously influenced these internal processes. In other words it wasn't always automatic. They were aware of the power that self-talk had with regards to how they perceived things, and were able to articulate examples where they focused their attention on the positive, which bolstered their self-belief, and in turn strengthened their resolve (and confidence) as they interacted with the world around them. One young adult captured this sentiment when they com-

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mented that, 'I can do it, I can get that, I can achieve that goal ... and, like, you have to say to yourself you can do it, to do it'. These findings supported Peterson, Balthazard, Waldman and Thatcher (2008, p.343) who asserted that having a positive attitude can be learned, and Fredrickson and Joiner (2002; p.172) who asserted that positive emotions contribute to an upward spiral of overall emotional wellbeing.

#### **'Building confidence' – interpersonal communication skills**

While confidence contributed to healthy relationships (Cobb, 2007), competent interpersonal communication skills were identified by the young adults as an indicator of, and an enhancer of, confidence, both in self and in others. To be able to 'connect' with a wide range of people, 'hear' divergent views and be inclusive, while also having the skills to effectively and consistently articulate one's own point of view, was mentioned several times. For example, 'I think confidence is being able to relate and engage in all sorts of different contexts with different people, like feeling comfortable with adults, with children, on stage, with one person'. As this quote suggests, this did not need to be in a public or gregarious manner as it could equally occur quietly and discreetly. The essential message was that confident people were competent communicators. This linked with human capital theory (Mackay, 2003) in that not only was interpersonal communication seen to be an individual skill, it was also a valued skill within the community in which the young adults were located.

#### **'Building confidence' – being safe**

Having a sense of being safe increased confidence, although the stories varied as to whether it was the confident persona that protected them from adversity, or that being in a safe environment built confidence. Whatever came first, this linked to social cohesion theory which proposes that confidence was enhanced when people developed a deep-seated sense of security in the knowledge that they were safe and protected (Ginsberg, 2006, as cited in Engler, 2007). The most specific examples in this study came from two young men who, from the researcher's perspective, seemed quite physically strong. One young man shared how at another school just walking across the field posed a physical threat as other guys might take him on for being on 'their turf'. It seemed for these young men being free from physical intimidation enabled them to relax and gave them confidence to focus on other constructive opportunities. This reflected sentiments of a young mum (Lenihan, quoted in Chapman, 2009, p. D3) who shared that the safety provided by a home for teen parents enabled her to focus on the task of up-skilling and parenting.

#### **'Building confidence' – the contribution of whānau / family**

The findings in this research reinforced the well documented belief that family provided the crucial foundational location for unconditional support, belief and encouragement (Berk, 2005, Lauzière, 2006) which, according to the young adults, contributed to their confidence. One young adult who expressed this commented that;

I just think you need some support ... for me it's my family because ... my Mum and Dad are always the ones that tell me like, how good you are ... it sounds weird but you need someone to tell you, to remind you that.

Having identified this factor, the degree to which this occurred was not the same for all of the research participants. While many reflected this sentiment, some experienced their families to have unrealistic expectations, high demands and dismissive attitudes with regards to their hopes and aspirations. Some experienced their families as lacking a degree of

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authenticity when it came to being supportive, in that members of their family gave them positive feedback when they themselves believed this wasn't deserved. The outcome of this was that while they appreciated the loving intent, they hesitated when it came to believing them, and thus sought out other adults in an endeavour to get what they considered to be more honest and constructive feedback. Another contribution that whānau/family had on some of the young people in this study was to provide examples of how not to do things. One young adult described their whānau/family as being 'broken', and shared that 'that's probably the biggest thing I've got from my family to do with confidence, is seeing what has happened to my family ... not wanting to turn out that way is quite a huge thing'. Several research participants identified other meaningful locations (including teachers and adults involved in their extra-curricula activities) in which they both sought out and received unconditional support, belief and encouragement. This provided an example of pro-actively extending social capital (Colic-Peisker and Walker, 2003) in that they increased the circle of social relationships which they could draw on when seeking opportunities (Mackay, 2003). The notion of unconditional support, belief and encouragement demonstrated a degree of social cohesion, in that many of the young adults shared their belief that if they 'took a risk and fell over' someone would be there to support them (Bruhn, 2005). This reflected Sanders and Munford's (2008) findings that positive relationships, including caring and support, had a more significant impact than risk factors on positive outcomes for young people.

#### **'Building confidence' – a sense of identity**

Many of the research participants reflected the literature with their belief that having a clear sense of self-identity, along with a sense of belonging, contributed to building their confidence (Durie, 1998; Berk, 2005; Heaven, 2001; Cobb, 2007), although there was much variation in the detail. This sense of belonging included to a family (and extended family), an ethnic community, a spiritual-based community, an activities-based community (like drama, school or kapa haka), a work-based community and more informal groups (like a peer or friendship group). Many of the participants identified multiple places where they had this sense of belonging. One finding of interest was the significance that some research participants placed on having some degree of congruency between their self-identity and their perceived place of belonging. When there was not at least some sense of congruency a level of confusion and discomfort seemed to exist. As one young adult put it, being 'a fish out of water' undermined confidence. This was not the same as not being part of a group or a community, but rather related to being immersed in a context (like school, community, family, peer group, activity-based group) that did not sit comfortably with their beliefs, values and/or interests. Hence, the positioning was not so much being an 'outsider', but rather a mis-matched insider. When the young adults shared these stories there was an audible sigh of relief as they talked about how they moved from the context in which they did not have a sense of an affinity, to a community and context in which they did. This links to the fifth stage of Erikson's developmental-based psychosocial theory which unfolds during adolescence, namely the evolution of identity versus identity confusion (Heaven, 2001).

#### **'Building confidence' – being a mentor**

Being chosen as a leader and a mentor contributes to the development of a young adult's confidence (Heaven, 2001; Ministry of Youth Development, 2009). The fact that they had been singled out was, for them, a public acknowledgement that they had something worthwhile to offer, along with the recognition that they were trusted and valued. Some young adults shared how leadership roles that matched their interests and capabilities had been specifi-

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cally developed for them within their school community and that this significantly boosted their confidence. Their story suggested that while maintaining the set format for leadership within a school (for example, head girl and sports captain) there could also be some merit in developing other potential leadership and mentoring roles that embraced more diverse talents and expertise. Also, ensuring multiple leadership opportunities enables more young adults to benefit from this experience.

The research participants discussed how they had learnt from a range of adult role models (both positive and negative). These opportunities had contributed to an increase in their own self-awareness (and confidence) as they explored and clarified their own aspirations, values, priorities and the behaviours they considered to be appropriate (and inappropriate).

### **'Building confidence' – experiences and opportunities**

Providing young adults with a wide range of experiences and opportunities at a variety of levels supported the building of self-confidence. The research participants gave several interconnecting reasons for this. First, opportunities provided a vehicle through which they could learn more about their own strengths and weaknesses, and increase their insight with regards to what they enjoyed, along with identifying any real passions they may have. This supported the process of refining, working out where to focus, what they could aspire to, which in turn provided some sense of future direction. As one young adult put it, 'just randomly being able to do something that you didn't expect that you could do is just amazing ... it's like, I'm good at this, there might be other things that I'm good at as well that I've never attempted. It encourages you to do other things'. As a part of this process the young adults gained some clarity around what they did not enjoy and where they did not have aspirations. Stories shared indicated that developing a skill which did not resonate with interests and passions could actually undermine confidence. Apart from detracting from more meaningful pursuits, it seems that even talented young adults were eventually surpassed by others who did resonate with a particular skill, and thus were more engaged and motivated to practise. The findings supported Aoina (2006) who asserted that opportunities in a person's area of interest, or even in an area which could be classified as passion and interest neutral, built confidence. This occurred through the provision of challenges that extended, broadened horizons, and perhaps pushed young adults outside their comfort zone, which increased their personal insight and their likelihood of experiencing success. Being involved in a wide range of activities increased the amount of experiences from which a person can refer to with the notion that previous experience provided useful insight and information when tackling a similar experience in the future. This linked with the research participants' self perception of robustness and resilience. Knowing that they had found a pathway through something once strengthened the belief that they could do it again.

Another reason a wide range of opportunities enhanced confidence was because this provided a vehicle through which young adults socialised and got to know others whom they may not ordinarily have come into contact with. This gave them experiences with people from various cultures, ages and socio-economic positionings, and thus increased their knowledge of diverse communities, extended their potential friendship group and increased their social capital (Colic-Peisker and Walker, 2003).

### **'Building confidence' – acknowledging success**

It was surprising to learn the extent of the impact that acknowledgement and recognition of success had on confidence. Whether in the public arena, or in a private and low-key manner,

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the important thing was that success and achievement was acknowledged, and preferably by someone for whom the young adult had some respect. Some of the most heart-warming stories related to teachers who had quietly, unexpectedly and authentically congratulated the young adults for an achievement sometimes months, and even years, after the event. Just the reality that the success was noticed, and that the joy of this success was authentically shared by someone else, seemed to make all the difference. This was eloquently demonstrated by one young adult when they told their story that;

... at prize giving when I got a trophy the Principal said some really nice things about me, and that was nice ... but he's talking in front of a whole group of people, he's got to say something nice about me ... that was ... humbling but it didn't build my confidence hugely, but afterwards a teacher ... who I haven't even spoken to in a year, coming up to me and just saying all these really nice humbling things about me ... that really kinda made me shut up and gain some confidence.

### **Some advice for adults wanting to build confidence in young people**

The research participants were particularly forthcoming when asked for ideas around building confidence in others. Their advice included listening unconditionally, and not imposing 'the adults' frame of reference. Not trying to be 'youthy' by imitating the clothes, language and behaviours of young adults. A small group of research participants were quite vocal in how irritating they found this, with the message being that if they engaged with an adult it was because of the value they saw in that adult, as an adult, and not as an aging 'youth'. Be cognisant of the age and stage of children and adolescents. Within this was a particular reference to being aware of the multitude of separate and often competing demands (like school, work, friends, family and extra-curricular activities) that young adults were juggling. Be consistently respectful when interacting with young people, and have a genuine belief, faith and trust in them. Pro-actively encourage young people to 'give things a go' and to acknowledge and celebrate achievement no matter how big or small, be inclusive in all contexts, and genuinely believe as an adult that you can make a difference. This came with a cautionary note in that adults can make a difference either positively or negatively, and they need to both remember and take responsibility for this. The last piece of advice (which was made quite strongly by some) was for adults to provide constructive criticism. To say something was 'good' or 'bad' was of itself not particularly useful as this gave little insight or guidance on how to improve. Clear constructive and informative criticism enabled them to learn and move forward, which in turn built confidence. Many of the suggestions mentioned above can be linked with Erickson's developmentally based psychosocial theory (Heaven, 2001; Cobb, 2007) along with resilience and strength based perspectives (Ungar, 2008; Saleeby, 2002). Having said that, the advice given by the research participants resonated particularly with human capital theory and social capital theory (Mackay, 2003) in that young adults have a vested interest in, and are impacted upon by, the interdependent and dynamic relationships they have with adults.

Cultural advisors involved in this project highlighted the cross-cultural environment that Māori students negotiate when joining a mainstream educational community. They discussed how having a strong sense of ethnic identity and belonging contributed to the building of confidence for Māori in this context. Aspects like te reo (language), whakapapa (genealogy), whanaungatanga (relationship/reciprocity), tikanga (custom), kaupapa (rules/guidelines), along with whānau (family), hāpu (sub-tribe) and iwi (tribe) were all

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mentioned. These components, although compartmentalised within a school community (for example, a Māori cultural group), were acknowledged contributors to building confidence, and authentically integrating them within the wider school context enabled a Māori world view to secure a positioning and equitable recognition within the mainstream. This perspective became particularly relevant when considering the impact that leadership roles, a range of opportunities, and the acknowledgement of achievement and success, have on building confidence.

## **Research limitations**

The young adults' in this study only occasionally mentioned the impact that peer or friendship groups had on 'building confidence' which was surprising considering the abundance of literature that discusses this connection (Berk, 2005; Heaven, 2001; Cobb, 2007). On reflection using focus groups in which participants came from the same school community possibly influenced this. For the participants to talk about their friends and peer group meant they would be talking about each other, and about people from outside the group with whom others in the group might know.

## **Recommendations for future research**

Three recommendations are made from this study. The first is to further explore the relationship between confidence and other broader categories in which confidence is assumed to be embedded, like self-esteem, self-belief, self-efficacy and resilience. Bringing the concept of 'confidence' out from under these umbrellas may provide useful guidance not only in building confidence, but also in enhancing the umbrella concepts themselves. The second recommendation is to further explore the relationship between ethnicity, identity, and confidence. When asked to identify their ethnicity the 16 participants responded with (between them) 10 different classifications. Of those who had migrant parents, about half included the ethnicity of their migrant parent when identifying their own ethnicity, while the other half solely identified as New Zealander or New Zealand European. There was clearly some shared understanding and appreciation amongst most of the young adults regarding the contribution that Māori had with regards to identity and confidence, however a shared understanding was not so apparent for the classifications of New Zealander, Pākeha, or New Zealand European. To a degree this reflects the wider Aotearoa / New Zealand community in which discussions around the relationship between citizenship, nationality, ethnicity and identity are continuing (Liu, McCreanor, McIntosh and Teaiwa, 2005). When reflecting on the central positioning of ethnicity in relation to identity, particularly indigenous identity (Berk, 2005; Durie, 1998), and considering that cultural and ethnic-based analyses are consistently in the public and political arena, it may be of benefit to strengthen the capacity of all young adults to locate themselves within this discourse (Callister, Didham and Kivi, 2009).

The findings suggested that confidence can be pro-actively enhanced at the individual, family and community levels, and that the strategies involved are simple, inexpensive and easily achievable. As the researcher I was privileged to hear directly from the young adults how they thought confidence could be enhanced, and I recognise the potential value of this information for schools. Hence the third recommendation is that high schools routinely undertake exit interviews with their Year 13 students in order to gather this information as it relates to their school context.

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## Conclusion

Drawing from the insights shared by the young adults involved in this research an emergent definition of 'confidence' is proposed, namely that 'confidence is knowing who you are, having pride in who you are (inside and out) and being able to portray who you are to others'. The findings from this study do not suggest that there is one shared understanding of 'confidence', nor that there is one linear pathway to 'building confidence', but rather that there are a variety of interconnected components. However, there seemed to be a clear shared understanding and agreement among the young adults that 'confidence' as a concept existed in its own right, involved emotion, is an enabler and is a desirable thing to have.

Hearing the perspective of young adults is essential not only for those working alongside them, but also for those involved in developing programmes or policies that impact on them. Centrally positioning young adults' perceptions, interpretations and shared meanings shifts the paradigm from young adults as passengers and victims, to a more empowerment and strength-based approach where they are active contributors to the world they participate in, and also the one they will inherit as they move into adulthood.

Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand new ending (Bard, as cited in Weld and Appleton, 2008, p.34).

**Notes.** The research design was approved by the Massey University Ethics Committee (09/48) in July 2009. A full pdf of this research can be located at : <http://muir.massey.ac.nz/handle/10179/568/browse?value=Fagan%2C+Karen&type=author>

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