

---

# ‘Stories from beyond’: Understanding the lifeworlds of young people

---

Jennifer Skattebol

[j.skattebol@unsw.edu.au](mailto:j.skattebol@unsw.edu.au)

## Abstract

Lived experiences are the bones of this article: the lived experiences of delivering the resources needed for secure futures to young people in highly disadvantaged contexts. At the heart of the article is a biography of a young woman who captures the imagination. I share her story because the strength of her internal assets and her interest in articulating them contrast with her risk factors and the immediate impression of her demeanour. This article details the process of discovering these strengths through an interview that was part of a service evaluation. It offers a detailed walk through the processes that researchers and practitioners take to find the internal strengths of young people. In placing myself — an evaluation researcher — within the story, I offer a complete service landscape picture stretching from the lived experience of being under-resourced to the efficacy of interventions and then on to the production of policy evidence. Evidence is now a central plank in the struggle to close equality gaps, but its production is typically invisible. I set the scene with a brief account of myself — the storyteller — and then I turn to the question of what we broadly know about disadvantage experienced by young Australians. This is followed by a detailed account of the production of evaluation evidence. This inter-subjective account of the researcher and the researched, enables the story of a young woman who embodied and lived these ‘statistics’ to take flight. It offers insights into her assets and how they interact with the resourcing and policy landscape as *she experiences it*. Finally, I connect this story of how we find out about assets to the good practices identified in Seymour’s Youth Development Research Project, which organises the articles in this issue.

## Introduction

When the expression of interest for an evaluation involving the Brisbane suburb of Inala came across my Sydney desk, images flashed across my mind. I remembered the sidewalks, the kitchen tables where people would show up for a quick chat at dinner time, eyes flickering to cooking pots that were large and soon to be shared. Inala is one of Australia’s more renowned poverty belts. The trip from Indooroopilly to Inala is familiar to me: Jagera country. It is a path from ‘the valley of the leeches’ to ‘resting time’. These days I usually go by car from my parents’ house in Indooroopilly through the ‘bare hills’ of Jindalee, but in my younger days I

cobbled together walking, bus, train, bus and walking. Inala is not easy to reach. As the translated names suggest, the trip is a movement from lush rainforest pockets to hot dry flats punctuated by swamps, clumps of Tea Tree, honeysuckle and forest oak. I never knew the meaning of these names as a child growing up in Australia, but I learnt them recently in Sydney from my daughter's Jagera primary school teacher who is reclaiming his language as an adult.<sup>1</sup>

When I was at school, my sister's bestie lived in Inala. I soon learnt it was a good destination for jiggling school. No one in Inala was likely to recognise my selective school uniform, let alone report me. The curved Inala sidewalks are an integral feature of 1950s public housing design. On my way to interview Kiara, a young Aboriginal woman who used a service that supported young people who had left custodial care, I was aware of my feet on the hot ground. In my Birkenstocks, my feet made the same sound on the grass as they did when contained by a Clark's school shoe, and later in my twenties, when I wore Doc Martin boots as a refuge worker. I think of this grass as Crickle grass — sharp, brown and full of bindis. Dr Suess would have had fun with the powerful incentive to keep your shoes on no matter how hot it is. While the grass and the curbs remain the same, each time I return to Inala I have more social and economic power. I remain on a white middle-class trajectory and Inala remains as a materially under-resourced community. While there have been small fluctuations, inequality in Australia has been constant over time (Whiteford 2014).

As a refuge worker, I have sat around homes drinking bottomless Nescafé's with women who roared with laughter about ducking away from men quick with their fists. As a researcher, I have sat in halls conducting focus groups with people who need a \$30 voucher for toiletries, bread or a cold beer and are willing to talk about how we should motivate the unemployed. It's not all valorous. People lie, cheat, trade their partners in for younger models — just like they do everywhere. The difference is that high-poverty suburbs pulse with stories peppered with the high emotion of needing to chase the most basic of resources.

The importance of building on the resources young people possess is central in Kathryn Seymour's (2012) *Good Practice Principles for Youth Development Organisations*, but understanding these resources and the way they are woven into the fabrics of everyday life can be challenging. Resources are not effective if they work against the grain of young people's ethical and emotional priorities, existing assets and resources. This article offers insights into how young people's strengths, resources and assets<sup>2</sup> are inherently connected to the way in which they understand their place in the world. I contend that it is not always easy to gain insight into young people's lifeworlds. I use a single case to draw a detailed intersubjective account of an interview with a young woman who was thriving in spite of her odds. My intention is to both share Kiara's story of resourcing and the process of seeking and understanding such a story. To this end, I have laid bare the experience of conducting evaluation research itself.

The evaluation and evidence-gathering end of service delivery is rarely discussed, but is an increasingly important aspect of program design and delivery. We live in evidence-based times, and practitioners need to know as much as possible about how evidence is produced so they can bring coalface expertise to the critique

and deployment of evidence in their processes and programs. Evidence comes in many forms, and policy-makers attach different values to types of evidence. Administrative outcome data and demographic statistics are regarded as the most valid forms of evidence by policy-makers and politicians, as these create a picture of society that make the scale of issues fathomable. Administrative data are often poorly kept because coalface workers do not know how they are used in policy-making and data entry that may or may not capture the day's successes is yet another task at the end of a busy day.

Qualitative research has an important role to play in the suite of data available to policy-makers. Its beauty lies in its capacity to bring life, detail and complexity to these pictures of scale. The people that make budgetary decisions are often moved by stories from everyday lives because they act as conduits to their own relational worlds. Moreover, this form of data can reveal why a particular intervention worked at a particular moment in time or not.

However, the task of understanding service users' experiences is filled with white noise<sup>3</sup> — deliberate and unintentional distractions that make hearing experiences of service use difficult. This article is an attempt to show how we need to get under the white noise of service power to understand young people and the resources they have. Evaluation researchers are particularly vulnerable to white noise, as we are perceived as having a judicial role. Policy-makers are looking for clear statements about how to direct funding. Practitioners are under pressure to meet KPIs for continued funding. It is often second nature for under-resourced young people to create white noise when they encounter anyone with authority. They are adept and agile storytellers, practised at fitting their stories to the resources available, even if this is not what they want or need in the long run. Many employ defensive tactics because they have been harmed by systems as well as by individuals. They move between services and keep many of their experiences silent so they are less vulnerable to the deficit meanings others may make of their lives.

A process of seeking consent that is both respectful and rigorous can build the rapport necessary for young people to talk about how their communities work, and their values and priorities. This situated analysis is critical to understanding the habituated stances young people present so that they can access resources within the system. Kiara had a soft demeanour that was both appealing and hard to read. While she was unique in many ways, she was not unusual in this demeanour. I have encountered this combination of qualities many times in critically under-resourced young people. You will see that I often made mistakes in my interview with her. I sometimes closed down the fragile openings between us. It will also become clear how much she wanted her ethical and emotional priorities and resources to be understood. Kiara was definitely *not* a 'talker', but together we produced compelling evidence about how different resources must work together to 'fit' a young person's current assets and priorities for the future.

My meeting with Kiara took place in a windowless meeting room. She emanated stillness. I immediately knew I needed to invoke the life of this space when it was filled with young people, or our conversation would be confined to attempts to produce the 'correct answers' to my questions. Correct answers are both a compliance and a way of holding you — 'the welfare' — at arm's length. I am

happy to be identified with this profession, but I need service users to know I am not coalface welfare. I cannot get anyone a cheque, a house or a job, nor will I report them to the authorities.

With a tiny move of her head and eyes, Kiara glanced up at me as I sat down parallel to her. I understand the effort it took. With this barely perceptible move, Kiara paid me the honour of white politeness — eye contact — and showed me she was ‘brought up right’. Relieved by her generosity, I breathed. I fiddled with the intimidating sheath of legalistic consent forms that are mandatory in my work. I left them unopened between us on the table but explained their content and said she could sign them later when she had a chance to see how the interview went. She agreed to turn on the recorder. ‘This room is pretty dull right now,’ I opened. ‘What do they use it for when it’s fun?’ She shrugged. We were off to a rip-roaring start.

## The scale of youth inequalities

Before I share more of Kiara’s story, I want to slip on the shoes of the policy-makers who fund the services that Kiara uses, that service providers deliver and that I evaluate. What do they know about the lives of young Australians like Kiara, who are faced with resource gaps that lead to precarious economic and social circumstances? Imagining myself in these forward-looking budget-conscious brogues helps me, as an evaluation researcher, to remember what is known and to see where my research might make a contribution.

Most policy-makers know we are a rich country with shameful demographic statistics: 17 per cent of young Australians are living below the poverty line (ACOSS 2014); 13 per cent of young people experience drug and alcohol dependence; 26 per cent live with mental disorders (AIHW 2011); approximately 10 per cent provide significant ongoing help to family members with a disability or long-term illness (Cass et al. 2011); 3.4 per cent of teenage women are mothers; 1.87 per cent are subject to child protection; 23 per cent of these young people are Indigenous (AIHW 2015); and 0.05 per cent are young offenders (AIHW 2015). Experiences of adversity, exclusion and risk are often concentrated among the same young people (Mendes et al. 2014; Scutella et al. 2013). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, for example, are more likely to experience poverty, have higher rates of suicide and be in the juvenile justice system (AIHW 2010–11; Tilbury 2009), and to experience significant educational disadvantage (Mitrou et al 2014; Sikora and Biddle 2015; Song et al 2014).

These statistics give very little colour to the complexity of lived experiences of adversity. Typically, young people experiencing multiple disadvantages have multilayered, interrelated needs and long histories of drawing support from a range of services and informal networks (Hayes and Skattebol 2015; Schmeid et al. 2013; Skattebol et al. 2012). Resource gaps place young people at heightened risk of adverse outcomes as they transition to adulthood (France et al. 2010; Munford et al. 2013; Skattebol et al. 2012). For many young people, building a ‘resource package’ that supports adequate standards of living and wellbeing in adulthood is a long and complicated task.

Kiara is one of those at the pointy end of resourcing need — those who have been placed under statutory care at some point in their lives. Many do not receive the

assistance necessary for smooth transitions from care to stable social and economic independence. A national survey of care leavers found that:

- 64 per cent did not have a leaving care plan
- 35 per cent were homeless in the first year of leaving care
- 46 per cent of boys were involved in the juvenile justice system
- 35 per cent had completed Year 12
- 29 per cent were unemployed (compared with the national average, which is 9.7 per cent), and
- 28 percent were already parents themselves (McDowall 2009).

We know these poor outcomes for young people leaving care are due partly to a lack of adequate support during the critical transition period. In 2010, the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) recognised that the care system is characterised by:

- insufficient outreach by post-care and mainstream services
- insufficient capacity and expertise across the system to meet the particular, and often complex, needs of young people transitioning from out-of-home care to independence
- insufficient support for carers to facilitate a smooth transition to independence
- inadequate assessment of needs and planning support for young people
- a low profile of leaving care services within the broader community and disparities between policy and practice (FaHCSIA 2010).

The service where I met Kiara was part of an array of investments to develop holistic local approaches (Antonucci et al. 2014; Australian Government 2009a, 2009b). Despite these investments and changes in service design, many young people with complex needs still experience resource shortfalls. Evidence is needed on how young people conceptualise their whole resource landscape — including formal services and informal supports, and the relationships between them. We need to know how their views of the services available evolve and change as they move between service types and how services interact with their informal networks (Withington et al. 2013). Understanding how young people cobble together the resources, skills and assets that are important to them has to be the cornerstone of effective service system design. Once we know what is important to Kiara, we can look back over these statistical pictures and see the gaps differently.

### **Conceptual framing of young people who are under-resourced**

In research, we know loosely what we want to find out, so we need to think about how we will investigate the issues. I bring two key ontological frames to my epistemological work with young people. Ontology is how we think about 'the nature of being'. We have many things in common as people, but are different in perhaps as many ways. The assets and resources desired by people are not predetermined, but rather aligned to their way of thinking about what it means to be a person. Epistemology is about the way we come to find out about things — in

this case, the assets and resources that are meaningful to young people who have been separated from their families.

The first ontological premise in my work is well established, and has traction with program designers, policy-makers and evaluation funders. It is the idea that young people are capable informants and experts in their own lives, and thus in the service landscapes they inhabit (see, for example, Centre of Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2011). This premise may well be accepted in research, but it can be hard to work with epistemologically because the notion that young people do *not* know what is good for them prevails in many social fields. Their generational and under-resourced position places them under habitual pressure to look for the ‘correct answers’.

There is a general epistemological problem in how to enable service users to talk broadly and critically about what they receive. Most do not want to alienate providers who offer them resources that alleviate the shortages in their everyday lives. Furthermore, resource shortages accumulate over years, and people’s sense of entitlement can become eroded. How can we ensure they share their experience with reference to their lifeworlds beyond the service systems of which we are a part?

My second ontological frame helps with this problem. Yuval-Davis (2006) argues that a sense of belonging is central to who we all are. Belonging comprises three types of attachments: to social locations; to identifications and people; and to ethical and political values. The courses of action taken by people are founded in these attachments (2006: 205). In my view, this ontological framework lightly aligns with Aboriginal ontologies that border attachment categories quite differently. Here, attachments to country are inextricable from those to people and other living and spiritual things. Lucashenko (1998: 51) argues that ‘knowledge of land, knowledge of the spiritual world, knowledge of practical men’s or women’s business — these are what define us’. Elsewhere (Lucashenko 2008: 66), she again emphasises these connections and intimacy with place: ‘We all need the land, as it needs us. We all need each other — Aborigines and whites and all other living creatures. That is what a family is.’ Ontologies that emphasise attachments as critical yet diverse point me to biographical narratives as an epistemological window for finding out what is important to people beyond what they think I want to hear. Big-picture stories of self are always woven into a fabric of attachments. Biographies are a rich platform from which to track the resourcing efforts from young people’s standpoints, ethical values and everyday priorities. Partial stories compartmentalise and fragment our understanding of young people’s assets and needs; they are at best a small and foggy window into young people’s resource requirements. Biographies, in contrast, cannot be told without one’s over-arching ethical priorities becoming evident.

I have recently drawn on Henderson and colleagues’ (2012) detailed framework for unpacking biographies. Their model relies on interviewing techniques with open-ended beginnings that enable people to order their own stories according to their own priorities.<sup>4</sup> They contend that there is analytic value in listening to not only what is said but also how stories are told, and offer the idea of sequencing, motifs and voice. What is the starting point where the young person begins to talk freely? What weighting is given to different hardships and celebrations? What is left out? What reasons might there be for omissions? What investments and

divestments are made in different identities and motifs of self? How do the power relations between researcher and researched influence the telling of stories? I take these conceptual considerations into the research process of talking to young people.

## Interview as dance

To acknowledge and diffuse the power relations in the research process, I find it useful to think of data collection as a dance of respect. This reminds me to see the young person as a partner in the interview: I need to be sure they know the steps. It reminds me to attend to small utterances or body movements. Once I have established that we are a partnership and that my partner has an entitlement to both speak and remain silent, the dance can begin. I imagine an interview as a form of Cumbia,<sup>5</sup> a partnered dance with repeated movements where people move between facing each other, to parallel positions with a few twirls. The first step is to ensure my partner wants to dance and knows that they can sit out. This basic step is informed consent.

You will recall Kiara's dead-end shrug. After this beginning, I returned to a well-rehearsed interviewing script. I slid a voucher across in front of Kiara, saying:

Coming here today is enough for the voucher. You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want. We can talk about the footy and then go if you want. No one will know whether we talked or we didn't. I know young people have to tell their stories over and over and are sometimes sick of it. Shall we go on?

This establishes the possibility of stepping out of the interview, out of the dance, in recognition that some people have little control over their stories. My opening moves are brief. Once the invitation to remain is accepted, I tell them what is in the information letter and explain the timeframe for the interview (20 minutes to an hour) and what questions they can expect. Through my own gesture, I non-verbally establish that we do not have to look at each other beyond what is polite in a formal situation. I make it clear that there is no consequence or disappointment in stepping out with things untold.

Information exchange is expected, so I begin with known and expected steps — known questions about the self, known answers. Demographic questions work well — age, living situation, schooling. These questions are treated as if they are simple but usually they are not. I move through them lightly, ready to hear more detail. For me, this part of the interview is about holding the young person on known safe ground.

Once informed consent is established, I communicate that we can deviate from standard scripts, but the young person is in control of how far we go. I introduce a change in the tenor and offer questions that permit non-normative responses (for example, the possibility of living in many households rather than just one or two). It is useful to signal the shift: 'I am wondering ...' Sometimes I invite them to move away from normative scripts by gently tossing (more normative) statements back as a questions.

In dance terms, this involves two parties holding hands in a parallel stance so both parties to face the exit — they can then move away from or towards each other. If a young person moves back towards me, I resume a face-to-face stance, holding both hands with safe offers: 'Would you like to tell me what you liked

about . . . ?' Once this twirl of moving from a face-to-face to a parallel position becomes part of the repertoire of interviewer and interviewee, it is clear how the interviewee can lead and can get back to a space of following or indeed leave. This maximises their capacity to control the details important to them. In changing the leader, micro-interactions are critically important. Shifts in body and in affect signal readiness to proceed or the wish to retreat. I watch the feet of my dance partner intently; follow the footsteps — however small or hesitant.

Whenever a young person's lead stretches out to intimate or risky details, I gently remind them they are in an interview rather than the worker–client conversations with which they are more familiar: 'Oh that's an interesting thing for the government to know.' The trajectory of any interview is replete with directions not taken. Some of these tendrils of life experience are important, and interviewees want to share them. Linear storytelling rarely captures complexity. Some stories need confidence to tell. If I circle back around, I make openings to unfinished business that can be refused, 'I was wondering if XXX was important or not?'

### **Dancing with Kiara — her landscape**

Kiara remained nervous well into the interview. Her answers were minimal and clipped. I left a gap at the end of each of her comments to open up the space.

*How are you today?*

Good.

*How old are you?*

Sixteen.

*Who do you live with?*

Me and my mum.

Here we were, four words telling a huge story!

*Just you and your mum?*

Oh no, there are eight more of us.

*Okay . . . lots of you? How old are they?*

Twelve down to two.

*Oh . . . little tackers? Are they cute?*

No, they're pure evil — all of them.

She was totally deadpan. Barely moved a muscle when she spoke, stared straight ahead at the boring formica table. Yet she carried me home immediately and directly. I was there in the house. I knew already that her mother was the most important part of this story. I grew bold from her immediate generosity and followed her steps.

*Oh okay. Ten of you. I know the houses around here, my sister's best friend lived in one. Where do you and the pure evil fit?*

She stayed deadpan. It was a tricky question. They lived in a three-bedroom house — Kiara's mother, father and four boys in one room, aunt and uncle in the next bedroom. Then Kiara with the last bedroom to herself and some sisters unaccounted for. *Note to self:* don't look down and trip over my feet. We can work the sisters out later if need be. The omission crackled between us in the pause I left.

In a slow kind of way, Kiara quickly filled the gap with an explanation that she used to live in a tent in the backyard but exposure to the weather was too uncomfortable in the rainy season. I felt that much was being revealed quickly. I took the lead again, heel toe . . . I talked about how I like busy houses, how they can be noisy and fun and you are never lonely. She moved slightly; I interpreted this as relaxing. I managed to offer enough real detail about how it is to live in a crowded house to distance myself from 'the welfare' that might assess 'neglect' in her living conditions. Then I said busy houses can be hard — especially if, like me, you occasionally have a mood. Foot behind: 'How is it at your place?' I asked.

Pretty easy. The hardest thing is putting food on the table. The kids always eat so much. They're always hungry.

She was faster than me, unafraid. I needed to square us up again so we didn't lose balance. Young people find it very difficult to talk about food security (Butler 2016; Redmond and Skattebol 2014). It suggests that their parents cannot care for them, and Kiara has made it clear that her mother is a crucial attachment for her. Pugh (2011) argues young people do 'facework' to regain their dignity in a world that equates inadequate resourcing with laziness, slovenliness and often stupidity.

*Mmm . . . I bet the pure evil eat a LOT!*

Reflecting back food insecurity was risky ground, but I wanted her to feel heard. In my dance method, this is equivalent to slipping my hand off her shoulder and placing it on her waist — more intimate, a better hold. I changed tack so the intimacy didn't scare her away.

*How's school? What school do you go to?*

I go to a flexi-school. My mother gave me a choice between a boarding school or this flexi-school.

Again Kiara foregrounded her mother, offering an image of a woman with her head up who makes good schooling 'choices'. Such choice-making is compelled by neoliberal education policies (see Skattebol and Hayes 2016, for a discussion of this policy landscape). Kiara was firmly claiming her mother as an asset: a parent who sets firm expectations that her children will go through school.

*Oh, which one did your mum think would be best?*

Her mother thus securely recognised, Kiara's schooling story spilled out and emphasised a much broader service network than specified educational services. Alongside mainstream school and this flexi-option, there were community organisations, refuges, health and legal centres. The local system was not only integrated across education and care policy silos, but there were also blurred boundaries between local resident activism and professionalism. This story was one of strong inter-agency and community development work. I was mindful that concentrating on understanding the distinctions between these two — important for policy but perhaps not for Kiara — could make me clumsy, a toe treader. I looked up and verbally concentrated on the schooling story while actually concentrating on how the service system worked together — my feet.

Kiara's mum thought the flexi-school was the best option. They knew about 'this place suburbs away' through a local worker who kept connected to families through the primary schools and community events. Kiara said her family always went to local community events, 'to get the little ones out of the house'. (Kiara's commitment to 'the pure evil' continued to run strongly though her narrative.) This worker — Brayden — was always around the primary schools and local events, and Kiara told the story as if she had always known about these different schooling options. The flexi-school was enabling for Kiara.

At first I did not accept going to a girls' school, but then I got used to it. I realised that I would not last a week at the other school. They made things easy.

*What does easy look like?*

Help us find jobs, transport, help us look after students' kids while they go to class and all that.

The flexi-school offered a childcare centre for its student population. Kiara made the journey across 20 kilometres of Brisbane's black belt with her youngest siblings so they could go to childcare while she attended school.

I offer:

*So there's lots of young mums at your school and you can look after little ones?*

I could never be a young mum. I've kind of got my siblings.

She closed down. Eyes back to the table, hands still. I had stumbled and implied she was a young mum. I needed to change direction. I asked about the local worker — the connector.

*How old is he, do you reckon . . . middle-aged like me?*

To the young, 'middle-aged' has no nuance. 'What's my age?' is a bit of fun in interviews; young people know how much older people care about their age. Kiara turned me down for this particular Cha Cha.

In Inala, it is important to have a past, and Kiara was quick to underscore Brayden's credibility. He had been known in the community since he was a kid — her mother's age, Kiara said.

The local refuge put me in contact with Brayden . . . they knew I needed local.

She stilled again, the tension around needing refuge was louder than needing local. I understood this step now. She was unsettled by disclosing any need not met in her mother's home. There were so many littlies. However, we have established that I know her mother is important and works in her best interests, so I keep moving with this new information, but sidestep the *need* for refuge.

*What was it like in the local refuge?*

Good. My cousin was there.

She told me more about her attachments. A good refuge was one with a cousin in it. A good housing option was one right near her mum. I stayed with the quality of the refuge.

*Yes, local is really good isn't it? Are the local services good? Are they for Indigenous women or all sorts?*

Kiara said it was for all women — there were lots of different cultures there. She gracefully offered me a twirl:

Me and my mum weren't really getting on for a little while.

This was the first edge towards the reasons she may have been in and out of home care. It was a complicated dance, so we needed to get the choreography right. I now had the phrase 'not getting on'. I needed a pause to collect my thoughts. I quickly decided to return us to Brayden, thinking he was pretty safe ground.

*So he's been around the community for as long as you can remember, at all the community events? He's Murri, is he? Or did he grow up around here on Jagera country?*

She shrugged, unwilling to name someone else's identity. I saw straight away that I'd stood on her toes. I know better than to ask someone to comment on another's claim to Aboriginal identity. I breathed, told myself not to panic: people are generous. In my experience, many Aboriginal people will overlook intrusions if they feel they are cultural mistakes rather than intentional injuries. I tried again.

*Are you Murri?*

Out came an elaborate family tree that she had probably been naming since before she knew the names of farm animals. There was some Kanak heritage — I was in Queensland. I breathed out and told her about my social connections to a mob from Vanuatu. We relaxed again. I mentioned the travel subsidies from the Vanuatu government for descendants of the indentured labourers to return to Vanuatu and reconnect. People in the islands want to know what happened to their relatives blackbirded to the Queensland cane fields. She glanced at me, a filament of a recognised claim between us.

Ask Brayden. I am sure he could find out for you.

I looked around the characterless room. I needed to do the moves we both knew for a little while so I asked for practical knowledge about the service.

*So what do they do in here?*

The list was long and fun — shopping for shoes and toiletries, pamper days, returns to country, football, paintball. Kiara moved quickly into evaluation mode. She proudly said:

I've not turned down one outing.

What a statement! This was such a strong motif of self. I wanted to know more about how this shy young woman tucked these opportunities under her belt.

*What has been your favourite?*

Surfing, we went surfing. I didn't think I could stand up but I did.

*Oh that's hard! I have never been able to stand up. You must have the sea in you.*

She described the stages of standing up on a surfboard. She beamed and in that light I felt like I could see her for the first time. I felt lucky. I repeated the statement.

*So you always go on the outings?*

I use them to keep mind off going on the streets . . . back in Grade 9 until Grade 10 and then went to youth health program. Dad was locked up. I never really had that home support.

The activities were not only fun in her mind; she saw them clearly as protective. She took me dancing, twirled me under her arm, stomped hard on the ground.

I don't want to go back on the streets. All my cousins are on the streets. It made me all hard . . . the thing of having no money and having to steal stuff.

I agreed: Yeah it's a relief when you can get the things you need without all the trouble.

*When Mum turned her back on me, I only got my cousins and they showed me you just got to be one with the streets and we found youth groups to do laser force and some football every week.*

More language for the dance — it was a light touch — 'turned her back on me'. I felt her desire for me to understand. I ask her how she's going getting the things she needs. Kiara again emphasised her assets and resourcefulness: she was sorted — well, almost. She was doing a work placement with an employment agency — the best employment capital one could accrue. She was completing a Certificate 3 — the credential the education system is mandated to deliver. She wanted to be a youth worker and help kids like herself. It's a common aspiration among those who have found help navigating the system. She wanted to go to university and become a midwife. This was a far horizon but well informed. She knew what was available and how to get there. A very genuine curiosity about this shy, seemingly reluctant young woman was growing in me, and I was relaxing into the interview knowing she wanted to talk. I tested how grounded her aspirations were:

*How do you go at school?*

My school work's alright . . . not highest in class but not dumbest.

*Yeah, mine was too.*

She looked at me with doubt. I explained that I had much, much better start, but I wasn't the brightest and wasn't the dumbest. I told her I have been able to do what I want, and hopefully so will she. I moved back to talk about resources at home.

*Homework can be hard to do in a busy house or a tent, can't it?*

She said they [the service] found her cousin a flat over near the school. Her cousin did not take it.

I would have taken it, but it wouldn't have worked. I would have come home again. It was too far from her mum and them.

I wasn't sure if she was suggesting she had been offered a flat or not, so I bypassed the issue and asked what it was that *she* needed. This was a unit out the back of her mum's place consisting of a bedroom with bathroom but no kitchen. I saw straight away how perfect this would be for her and her whole family. She told me these units were discontinued — like a line of electrical equipment that has been superseded. She said they were trying for a caravan. I am not sure how this is a better model (I hear later that council by-laws prohibit such additions to properties). This room at her mum's house was what she wanted the government to give her. Without a thorough understanding, her relationship and contribution

to her family, a service provider might presume a room somewhere else would do. This dance of allowing her to share her worldview, her ontology, her sense of being had been worth it. I was very clear why a room somewhere else would not meet her needs, and indeed would strip resources away from her family, the kids and Kiara herself.

Fiddling with my papers to signal a possible ending to the interview I asked:

*Is there anything else I should know?*

Nah.

Immediately after her quiet 'Nah', she looked directly at me and with a miniscule lift of her eyebrow tipped her head slightly forward and upward. The move was subtle but is nevertheless a salutation that can be seen across a street by a practiced eye. I knew the move as an invitation, not as a closure. I was unsure what to do. I paused again then made another offer. I wondered aloud whether there might be something else I needed to understand, something else the government should understand.

Important questions about her relationship with her Mum remained unasked and unanswered. I wanted to know how she recalibrated her relationship with her mother when she returned to her care, and indeed when she later left and returned of her own volition. I stepped into the dance decisively, taking the lead:

*Oh I forgot to ask. How did it come back together when your mum turned her back? We don't need to talk about this, but it sounds like a pretty important part of your story. Shall we finish up or just do this one more bit?*

Clearly, Kiara wanted me to know. She wanted the government to know. She began immediately from the point where she and her siblings were removed.

They shouldn't have spilt us up. We went away out of Inala. Not with family. We couldn't trust no one.

She entered the most complicated move of the interview, an explanation of why they were removed.

Mum never come home for a whole week. I was doing my Year 7 schooling. Mum always would leave me and my sister for about a week.

I breathed so she could breathe. Then she told a story I have heard many times about foster care — strict routines and rules curtailing the independence of a young person who has been fending for themselves and caring for others for years . . . 'kitchen hours, TV hours' . . . foster carers buying things for the lounge and kids not being able to sit in the lounge, failing to direct money to the kids:

I don't like what they did behind my back.

This story reverberates across states. It is one of several emblematic stories of foster care, and one that sits alongside those from young people who are satisfied with their care (Fernandez 2007). Delfabbro, Barber and Bentham (2002) found that many in care reported prolonged abuse, disillusionment and frustration in not being able to see siblings or parents, which were imbricated in ongoing feelings of unhappiness at being separated from one's family and often community. Bessell (2011) argues that this is compounded by the disillusionment and frustration of

having no say and no control over one's life, and that many wish for good training, respectful dialogue and negotiated freedoms.

After telling me about her fear of being trapped on the streets, of being a young mum, Kiara did a final twirl. She told me how important it is to her to stay close to her 'mum and them' because of the love between them:

Mum sent me \$400 and [the foster carer] stole all that. That's why Mum's fighting and saying they shouldn't be carers. Mum done meetings and counselling and all of that. Good thing about it, she done it for us. She grew up on the streets and never knew another way. She cried for us and she don't never cry. She done it for us.

I murmur how important it is to feel that love. I am warmed that she knows and understands her mother loves her. We wait in this moment, I let it grow big, then I gently suggest:

*Let's go over what you've said and when you are happy with it we can sign the consent form.*

I open my sheath of papers and pass her the consent form. While she touches it, I recount the important details so she knows what I have heard. I begin with how important it is for her to be with her mother and siblings for now, and what she needs from schools and services for this arrangement to be easy. I end with a (big girl's) blousey line about her standing up on that surfboard and how I can see her taking those risks and using those muscles all her life. The thongs on her broad feet flip-flop as she exits the room, voucher in hand, a shy smile on her face.

Kiara was a very successful resource user. She was able to accept and reject resources according to their 'fit' with her attachments and was able to share her reasoning. Importantly, she needed system resources that worked with rather than against her familial connections and that enabled her to accrue lifelong capabilities and internal assets. In my mind, the community worker who understood Kiara's desire to be connected to family was the most valuable external asset in this story. He resourced the whole family and its fabric in a low-key, ever-present way. He presented schooling options long before decisions were actually required. This enabled Kiara's mother and Kiara herself to work through options in the same way as families that understood schooling systems. Furthermore, Kiara's work placement was one that would allow her to gain not only employment capital but also employment system knowledge that would benefit the whole extended family.

I would argue that the key motif in Kiara's biography was that she was a contributing family member. She sought resources that benefited the wellbeing of the whole family. A key example of this was her emphasis on being able to look after the little ones and deliver them to daycare, and how this lay within her goals of attaining educational credentials. Her responsibility to do this kept her living at home and going to school when the house crackled with the tensions of ten people living together with insufficient food. The resources she was offered worked with her ontological frame and enabled her to care for others. She was thus also able to accumulate the individualised assets commonly associated with effective

transitions to adulthood (independent living skills, education credentials, work experience).

## Conclusion

My intentions in this article have been twofold. First, I wanted to share a resourcing story from a young woman who had been in care, been homeless and had contributed significantly to the stabilisation of her family. I have argued that resources must work with the way people see themselves and their attachments to people, places and things, as these can be conceptualised as a person's most valued internal assets. In the case at the heart of this study, a community worker embedded in the community over a considerable length of time was a critical external resource for a young person because of his ability to understand and work with her internal assets. This alignment of internal and external assets is a continuous theme in Seymour's (2012) good practice principles.

Second, I have outlined how difficult it can be to find out about young people's internal assets. Marginalised young people are often treated as miscreants, and frequently are told that some of the 'resources' or 'assets' that they hold dear are risk factors. I laid bare my own process of seeking information about a young person's resources and assets. I have foregrounded ways of talking and listening that are sensitive to the ways a young person might understand their own selves and worlds. This supports working beyond the well-rehearsed and bounded help-seeking scripts that are often presented to outsiders. I have referred to an approach to interviewing that continually checks assumptions and understandings as a dance. I have foregrounded the importance of practice that genuinely holds open an imaginary where we approach young people as knowing things about their lives that we do not know.

As researchers, we have the power to act as storytelling conduits between young people and policy-makers, but this very power is always threatening to rapport-building. I contend that the key to gaining access to things we may not know is attention to the ontologies that underpin young people's sense of self. It is my experience that young people expect unfamiliar adults to be thinking within the confines of the existing service system, and need encouragement to talk about what lies beyond or is overlooked by service architecture. Holding an understanding of my place in structural power is at the fore of my processes. I dance to support young people to tell their stories in ways that are true to them rather than to the program logics that shape services.

The value of 'beyond stories' is they exceed existing models of service delivery, and can thus provide insights into what works and does not work. These beyond stories are a valuable source of information about the assets identified by Seymour (2012) as central to positive development for young people. It is clear how important it is to have external resources that align to internal assets and ontologies. In Kiara's case, a school that could not support her caring responsibilities would have fragmented her energies and been a much more difficult environment in which to accrue educational capital. Finally, I contend that effective policy-making requires policies that enable young people to work from their own ontologies and values, and that work to ensure service providers can access the knowledge

they need to align the resources delivered with the internal assets of the young person.

## Endnotes

- 1 My thanks to Mark Tuton for all the Jagera words that now bounce around my home.
- 2 'Assets' is an alternative term to describe strengths and resources that has its heritage in economics and has risen in popularity with the policy focus on human capital development. Benson (2003) identifies developmental assets as a theoretical construct that identifies a set of environmental and personal strengths known to enhance educational and health outcomes for children and adolescents. The term is associated with Seymour's (2012) *Good Practice Principles for Youth Development Organisations*.
- 3 'White noise' is a physics term to describe heterogeneous noise filled with many frequencies of equal intensities (*Oxford Dictionary*). It makes distinguishing sounds one might want to follow difficult.
- 4 While I work from this basic model, I also contend that interview questions need to be shaped to the interviewee themselves and the level of scaffolding from the interviewer they expect and need.
- 5 A Colombian dance.

## References

- Australian Council for Social Services (ACOSS) 2014. *Poverty in Australia*. Sydney: ACOSS.
- Antonucci L. Hamilton M. Roberts S. (eds) 2014. *Young people and social policy in Europe: Dealing with risk, inequality and precarity in times of crisis*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Australian Government 2009a. *National Strategy for Young Australians*. Canberra: Commonwealth Government.
- 2009b. *Investing in Australia's young people*. Canberra: Commonwealth Government.
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2011. *Young Australians: Their health and wellbeing 2011*. Canberra: AIHW.
- 2012. *Juvenile justice in Australia 2010–11*, Canberra: AIHW.
- 2015. *Australia's welfare 2015*, [http://www.aihw.gov.au/australias-welfare/2015/young-people/#fig\\_4\\_8\\_3](http://www.aihw.gov.au/australias-welfare/2015/young-people/#fig_4_8_3).
- Benson P.L. 2003. 'Developmental assets and asset-building community: Conceptual and empirical foundations', in P.L. Benson, *Developmental assets and asset-building communities*. New York: Springer.
- Bessell S. 2011. Participation in decision-making in out-of-home care in Australia: What do young people say? *Children and Youth Services Review* 33(4): 496–501.
- Butler R. 2016. 'Children making sense of economic insecurity: Facework, fairness and belonging'. *Journal of Sociology* 53(1): 94–109.
- Cass B., Brennan D., Thomson C., Hill T., Purcal C, Hamilton M. and Adamson E. 2011. *Young carers: Social policy impacts of the caring responsibilities of children and young adults*, report prepared for ARC Linkage Partners. Sydney: SPRC.
- Centre of Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (CECFW) 2011. *Their voice: Involving children and young people in decisions, services and*

- systems. Melbourne: CECFW, [http://www.cfecfw.asn.au/sites/default/files/Their\\_Voice\\_Monograph\\_Web.pdf](http://www.cfecfw.asn.au/sites/default/files/Their_Voice_Monograph_Web.pdf).
- Delfabbro P. Barber J. and Bentham Y. 2002. Children's satisfaction with out-of-home care in South Australia. *Journal of Adolescence* 25: 523–33.
- Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, see FaHCSIA.
- FaHCSIA (2010) *Transitioning from out of home care to independence: A national priority under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020*. Canberra: FaHCSIA, [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/trans\\_to\\_ind.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/trans_to_ind.pdf).
- Fernandez E. 2007. 'How children experience fostering outcomes: Participatory research with children', *Child and Family Social Work* 12: 349–59.
- France A., Freiberg K. and Homel R. 2010. Beyond risk factors: Towards a holistic prevention paradigm for children and young people. *British Journal of Social Work* 40(4): 1–19.
- Hayes D. and Skattebol J. 2015. 'Education and the politics of belonging: Attachments and actions', in J. Wynn and H. Cahill (eds), *Handbook of children and youth studies*. Singapore: Springer.
- Henderson S., Holland J., McGrellis S., Sharpe S. and Thomson R. 2012. Storying qualitative longitudinal research: sequence, voice and motif. *Qualitative Research* 12(1): 16–34.
- Lucashenko M. 1998. 'Gender, Genre and Geography.' *Southerly* 58.4: 50–54.
- Lucashenko M. 2008. 'All my relations: Being and belonging in Byron Shire', in A. Haebich and B. Offord (eds), *Landscapes of exile: Once perilous, now safe*, Oxford: Peter Lang.
- McDowall J.J. 2009. *CREATE report card 2009: Transitioning from care — tracking progress*. Sydney: CREATE Foundation.
- Mendes P., Baidawi S. and Snow P. 2014. 'Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria: Strengthening support services for dual clients of child protection and youth justice', *Australian Social Work* 67(1): 6–23.
- Mitrou F., Cooke M., Lawrence D., Povah D., Mobilia E., Guimond E. and Zubrick S.R. 2014. 'Gaps in Indigenous disadvantage not closing: A census cohort study of social determinants of health in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand from 1981–2006', *BMC Public Health* 14(1), doi: 10.1186/1471-2458-14-201.
- Munford R., Sanders J., Liebenberg L. et al. 2013. *Conceptual development of the pathways to resilience Study. Technical Report 1*. Halifax, NS: Resilience Research Centre.
- Pugh A.J. 2011. 'Distinction, boundaries or bridges? Children, inequality and the uses of consumer culture', *Poetics*, 39(1): 1–18.
- Redmond G. and Skattebol J. 2014, 'Filling in the details: Significant events and economic disadvantage among young people in Australia', *Zeitschrift fur Padagogik*, 60: 552–68.
- Schmeid V., Brownhill S., Walsh P. 2013. *Models of service delivery and interventions for children and young people with high needs: Literature review*. Sydney: NSW Department of Community Services.
- Scutella R., Johnson G., Moschion J., Tseng Y.-P. and Wooden M. 2013. Understanding lifetime homeless duration: Investigating wave 1 findings from

- the Journeys Home project'. *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 48(1): 83–110.
- Seymour K. 2012, *Good practice principles for youth development organisations*, 2nd ed. Brisbane: Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance, Griffith University.
- Skattebol J. and Hayes D. 2016, 'Cracking with affect: Relationality in young people's movements in and out of mainstream schooling', *Critical Studies in Education* 57: 6–20.
- Skattebol J. Redmond G. and Zizzo G. 2012. Expanding children's agency: Cases of young people experiencing economic adversity. *Children and Society*, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315105682\\_Expanding\\_children%27s\\_agency\\_Cases\\_of\\_young\\_people\\_experiencing\\_economic\\_adversity](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315105682_Expanding_children%27s_agency_Cases_of_young_people_experiencing_economic_adversity).
- Song S., Perry L.B. and McConney A. 2014. Explaining the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students: An analysis of PISA 2009 results for Australia and New Zealand. *Educational Research and Evaluation* 20(3): 178–98.
- Sikora J. and Biddle N. 2015. How gendered is ambition? Educational and occupational plans of Indigenous youth in Australia. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 42: 1–13.
- Tilbury C. 2009. The over-representation of Indigenous children in the Australian child welfare system. *International Journal of Social Welfare* 18(1): 57–64.
- Yuval-Davis N. 2006. Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice* 40(3): 197–214.
- Whiteford P. 2014. Income and wealth inequality: How is Australia faring? *The Conversation*, 5 March, <http://theconversation.com/income-and-wealth-inequality-how-is-australia-faring-23483>.
- Withington T., Burton J. and Lonnie B. 2013. 'Placement trajectory: Mapping the journeys of children and young people in out-of-homecare', *Communities, Children and Families Australia* 7(1): 21–34.