

Pathways to Re-Engagement

Graeme Dingle Foundation's social research unit has turned the spotlight on the issue of youth disengagement from school and society, uncovering pathways to re-engagement.

During 2020 the Graeme Dingle Foundation saw an emerging and critical need for ways to address the negative events and distress faced by young New Zealanders, due to the impact of Covid-19. The Foundation moved fast to extend the reach of two flagship programmes, Project K and Career Navigator, more widely into the community, providing a broader base of support for rangatahi who were struggling - or identified as heading toward disengagement from school.

The Foundation currently delivers programmes to 28,000 tamariki and rangatahi across Aotearoa each year and has a 25-year record in researching and evaluating the effectiveness of programmes for youth. In 2021, given the existing robust research and evaluation practices around the effectiveness of the Foundation's programmes, the research team were able to design an evaluation framework for both pilot programmes Career Navigator Community and Project K Community.

We embarked on this crucial piece of evaluation to investigate the effectiveness of our two pilot programmes.

The findings revealed a group of young people disengaging from their peers, education, and society with little recognition. Many in Project K were still in school but taking to their rooms and socialising online - leaving their parents and caregivers feeling isolated, struggling to reengage them. However, as participants engaged with our Career Navigator and Project K Community programmes, their outcomes started to change.

Through further investigation, Graeme Dingle Foundation's research team found that social withdrawal behaviour has become a consistent theme for youth worldwide, with many young people flying under-the-radar. Known as 'silent' disengagement this has become a pressing issue. When young people experience significant adverse events - such as the Covid-19 pandemic - their motivation and confidence can decrease while their social anxiety increases, resulting in spending more time isolated in the home and being less connected with their friends, learning, and community. This can have a negative impact on their wellbeing and future outcomes.

However, the findings of Graeme Dingle Foundation's research show that through the inclusive environments created by these community-based pilot programmes, young people had a chance to test their ability, explore identity, and practice skills which they can apply to future challenging situations. Additionally, these programmes provided a safe place for rangatahi to gain confidence in their interactions with a diverse group which fostered connection and a sense of belonging - being 'seen.' Some uplifting and strong results have been seen with both programmes.

These findings show youth development programmes such as Project K Community and Career Navigator Community can make a material difference to the outcomes of young people. The Foundation's strategy is to broaden its reach to meet the needs of young people as the country comes out of the Covid-19 lockdown scenario. With investment now, this research shows it is possible to turn young lives around, building productivity, social and economic prosperity in Aotearoa, New Zealand for future generations.

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