

Innovative school offers teen mum second chance

by Jan Goldie

Nineteen-year-old Elley Curnow is a motivated student at Whangarei Teachers College looking forward to a career in education.

Just two years ago life was very different and she has credited an innovative Whangarei school for teen mums for the transformation.

Pregnant at 17, Ms Curnow had abandoned her hairdressing studies and was unsure of her future. After the birth of her son Jack, Ms Curnow became one of the first pupils at a school for teenage parents and turned her life around.

He Mataariki, founded in Whangarei by Sharon Davis two and half years ago, was then just one small classroom with eight students. But Ms Curnow found Ms Davis to be a source of inspiration.

"Sharon is amazing and enthusiastic," she says. "She believes in all of the girls. She believes they can go on and achieve. The school helped me to gain a lot of confidence and motivation."

After a term at He Mataariki, Ms Curnow felt she was ready to attend sixth-form at Whangarei Girls High School. There she excelled in her studies, earning first prize in drama and Maori and making the decision to go to teachers college. Now with future aspirations to be involved in alternative education and to "give something back", Ms Curnow is enjoying learning and life with two-year-old Jack.

Each year about 90 women under 18 become mothers in Whangarei, and Ministry of Education figures show Northland has the highest number in the country.

Based next-door to Northland Polytechnic in Raumanga, He Mataariki's current school roll is 21 students aged between 14 and 19. In three colourful classrooms students learn school curriculum subjects as well as parenting, relationship and practical skills, such as how to write a CV. Pupils bring their babies to class.

"It's all about second-chance learning — an opportunity to have another go," says Ms Davis.

"It might seem the end of the world at the time you get pregnant, but you can make choices."

She says Ms Curnow was a student who went through a huge transformation at the school.

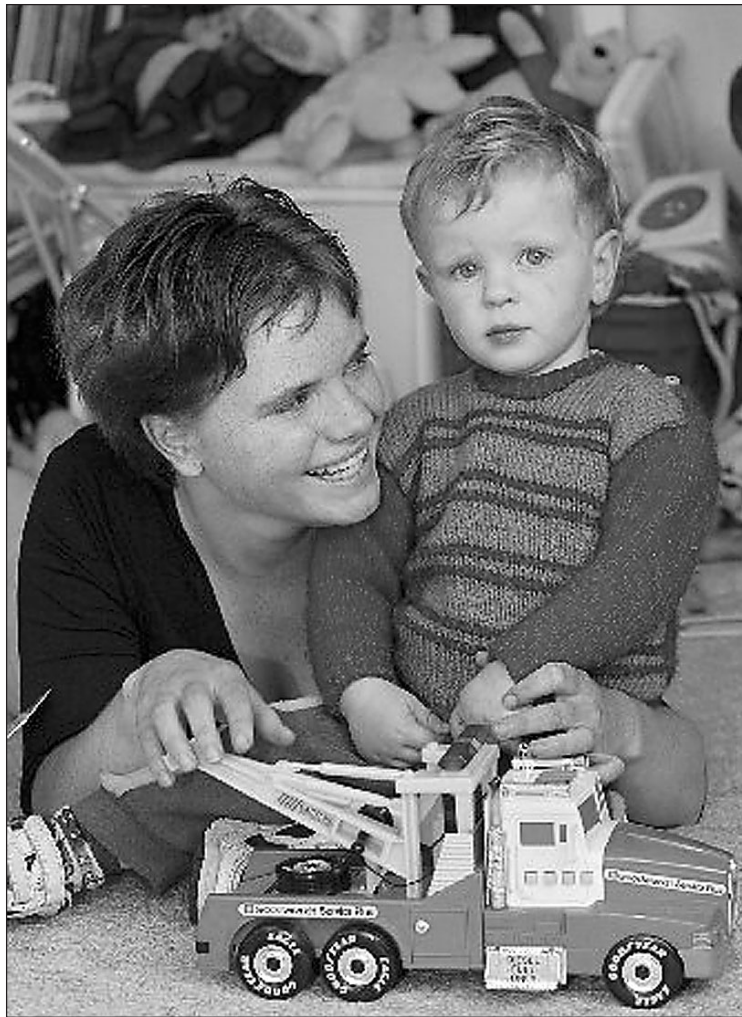
"That is the power of a young person making up their mind that 'I want to do it'," she says. "She made the choice."

Until now, He Mataariki has survived on community donations, for which Ms Davis says she is "incredibly grateful".

This year the school will apply to the Ministry of Education for funding. "It's expensive to run a school. You must have quality teachers," she says.

"I don't think it is a good example to girls if you don't demonstrate excellence. Everything I do is watched, from how I eat to how I run my business."

"It's all about second-chance learning - an opportunity to have another go."



BACK TO SCHOOL: Elley Curnow with son Jack has aspirations to "give something back".

PHOTO: NORTHERN ADVOCATE

Attacks on teachers increase

by Nada Tielu

Society is being blamed for an increase in violence against teachers in schools.

Ministry of Education figures show that nearly 400 students were ejected from school last year for assaulting teachers.

This represents a 15% increase from the previous year.

Act MP Deborah Coddington says these statistics are a reflection of a society that is increasingly tolerant of crime.

"I think it's dreadful. If you go behind the figures, you talk to teachers who have been set on fire."

Dale Burden, deputy principal of Mt Albert Grammar School, agrees.

"Schools reflect society by and large... Society in general, and some communities in particular, have become increasingly violent," he says.

Phil Smith, president of the Post Primary Teachers Association, says violence on television, music, movies and the internet have also contributed to the rise in assaults against teachers.

Drugs have influenced this trend, but, he says, this cannot be universally applied.

He says students nowadays are not as easily horrified as he was when he was young.

He points to "a greater tolerance of violence" in society today.

"You see it on the sports field."

Mr Smith says he even read an article with the headline "Bringing back the biff" which he says, only reinforces how violent modern society is.

He is worried schools emphasise the safety of their students and forget about the health and safety of teachers.

"Teachers are taught to put up with poor conditions."

Mr Smith says there need to be measures in place to ensure the safety of teachers.

For example, teachers in isolated areas need access to telephones and teachers on duty should work in pairs.

"They've got to think about the sort of scenarios that could happen," says Mr Smith.

Mr Burden says teachers at Mt Albert Grammar have access to offices and therefore, telephones.

Teachers on duty also work in pairs.

However, he admits there has been no violence in terms of assault-type violence at Mt Albert Grammar.

"I was quite surprised. It certainly hasn't been my experience in the schools that I have worked in."

Ms Coddington says schools should be doing more to protect teachers by improving security and running anger management courses for students who show signs of violent behaviour.

"Teachers should be educating children, not acting as police officers."

She says Education Minister Trevor Mallard and his department need to direct funding into these areas.

Mr Mallard was unavailable for comment on this issue.

Most see this increase in violence against teachers as something that happens in both low and high-decile schools.

Mr Burden, who has worked in low-decile schools, says he didn't come across this type of assault when he worked there.

But Mr Smith says it is prevalent in a lot of schools.

"High-decile schools are better at covering it up."

According to Mr Smith, this just emphasises the fact that teaching is a stressful job.

Motivating children Montessori style: directing rather than just teaching

by Anita McKinlay

It's an attitude, not just a technique. Carol Potts, head of Titoki Montessori School on the North Shore embodies the Montessori philosophy and educational system.

The Montessori educational system was developed by Maria Montessori early last century.

She insisted adults motivate children by providing them with the right materials, showing them how they are used and then leaving the children to learn for themselves.

Ms Potts read about the Montessori educational system while she was managing a division of a recruitment agency in London and teaching ballet and tap dancing to children.

She sold her car, cashed in her insurance policy and attended an intensive one-year course in London to train as a Montessori teacher.

"I just thought it would be perfect," she says. "Now I can't imagine doing anything else."

Ms Potts has been at Titoki Montessori School for eight years.

The school was set up as a co-operative and is administered by a committee of parents from the school.

The school caters for 27 children aged between two and six.

Ms Potts says the Montessori philosophy encourages each individual

child to reach their fullest potential, while encouraging children to be independent.

This leads to the development of the children's self-esteem and self-motivation.

Respect plays a significant part in the Montessori philosophy.

Ms Potts says when she started working

with children she noticed she had to be aware of her humour when she was around them.

"Some children can take you really literally and wouldn't necessarily understand the humour of what I said."

As part of the respect aspect of the philosophy, parents are encouraged not to talk about their children in front of them.

Another thing that sets Montessori schools apart is that those working with the children refer to themselves as directresses — a term Maria Montessori used.

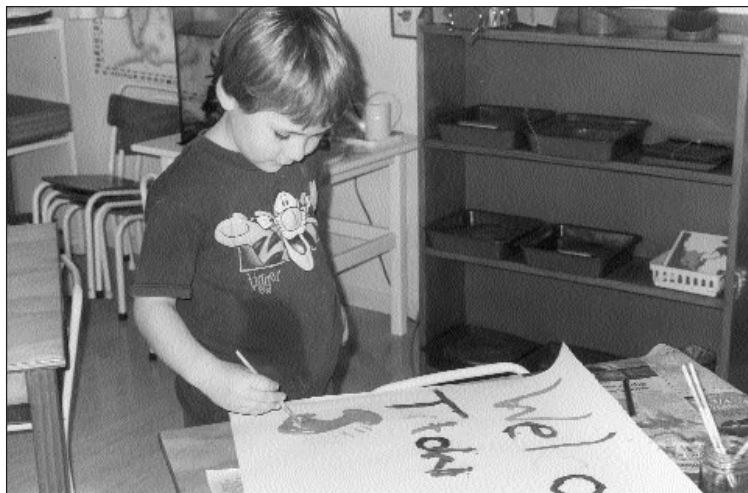
Ms Potts says the term directress is used because they direct the children rather than teach them.

"It's not like the children are empty cups that you need to fill up with knowledge," she says.

"They have much of the potential within them and it's for us to direct and make sure the right opportunities are put in their path."

Rex McDonald, vice-president of

"All we're out to do is educate the children and give the children the best start in life. It's not an elitist thing."



ARTIST IN TRAINING: The Montessori philosophy encourages children to work on activities they choose themselves.