

Re-engaging young people with education and training

What are the alternatives?

Alternative education programs are one way of responding to the disengagement of young people from mainstream schools. While there are a great variety of programs, those where young people experience success have incorporated a number of elements of best practice (Mills & McGregor 2010). This article reviews the attributes of effective alternative programs, with a particular focus on programs situated in Queensland, Australia. Establishing what constitutes a successful alternative program becomes increasingly important in an education climate that includes rapid movement toward a standardised educational experience with the attendant potential to further alienate those young people already existing on the margins of mainstream schooling.

by Kimberley Wilson,
Kellie Stemp &
Sue McGinty

Engagement in schooling is a key factor in producing equitable social and employment outcomes for all young people. School retention is an issue of growing concern highlighted in international social inclusion agendas and prioritised at national and state levels through educational reform policies targeted at the senior phase of learning. In 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) responded to disturbingly low rates of Year 12 completion by mandating young people's participation in schooling until completion of Year 10, with a further requirement of remaining in full-time education, training or employment until the age of 17 (COAG 2009). Substantial funding has been allocated to support the implementation of these school retention reforms, yet a significant proportion of young people continue to disengage prior to achieving their Senior Certificate or equivalent.

In 2009, 16% of teenagers (15- to 19-year-olds) nationally were identified as not being fully engaged in work or study. This was a sharp increase from 2008, and reversed a previously downward trend. This rise has been attributed to a downturn in the labour market and the absence of an offsetting increase in education participation. Early school leavers who do not continue in education are disadvantaged in the labour market and are less likely to be in full-time work and more likely to be unemployed or not in the labour market (Robinson &

Lamb 2009). According to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR 2010), 80% of available jobs in Australia require post-school qualifications, yet only 50% of the workforce has such qualifications.

In discussing school retention, it must be noted that there are concerns in relation to the accurate identification of early school leavers. There is limited data available to track young people who have disengaged from school prior to the age of 15. They comprise a significant cohort generally not reflected in studies focused on measuring senior school retention. Younger students may fall between the cracks, if they experience long absences through suspension and/or school exclusion, which create ripe grounds for complete disengagement. Another shortcoming of school retention studies is the focus on retention from one year to the next, which also omits those highly mobile students who might cease enrolment at one school yet fail to re-enrol at another school or experience an extended period of absence before re-enrolment.

Factors related to youth disengagement

It is common to find in any discussion centred on youth disengagement a list of individual factors that predispose a person to being “at risk” of early school leaving. Curtis and McMillan (2008, p.8) identify “not having an intention to complete school, coming from a non-nuclear family, being a below average academic achiever, being male, having an unfavourable attitude towards school and perceiving student-teacher relations as unsympathetic” as personal attributes associated with a greater likelihood of non-completion of school. Low-skilled parental occupation and parental non-completion of post-secondary education and training are also considered to be contributing factors.

A more detailed exploration of school-based factors related to student disengagement is provided by Lange and Sletten (2002) who highlight three influential factors that impact upon engagement in the

school context – academics, relationships with teachers and peers, and school size. The academic aspect takes into consideration suspensions, missed classes and academic failures that leave some students “weary of the school experience and distrustful that the education system can be a tool for their success” (Lange & Sletten 2002, p.11). The relationship dynamic in the school setting is related to the strength of students’ connections to their peers and adults as well as to the overall school climate, which has a significant impact on the academic investment of at-risk students. School size as a factor is linked to research that consistently demonstrates that large school size is an important dimension contributing to student alienation from the traditional schooling system (Lange & Sletten 2002).

A number of authors (see, for example, Smyth 2002; Croninger & Lee 2001) find a middle ground between the concepts of student/family contextual risk factors and school inadequacy in putting forward the idea that students who experience complex life experiences may be further disadvantaged by a lack of “school” capital. Some young people struggle to connect with the culture of the traditional school and therefore require an empathetic and supportive school response to ensure both academic success and social wellbeing (Mills & McGregor 2010). It is suggested that schools could mitigate disengagement risk factors by transforming relationships for learning so that they are inclusive of students’ families and communities and, as such, holistically support and enable young people to build social capital (Leadbeater 2008). However, this is not the typical education experience for many young people, with the result that many disengage from education completely and do not have the resources required to fully participate within their community.

Consequences of disengagement for individuals and communities

The consequences of youth disengagement from education for young people and their communities are significant. Long-term

The learning experiences of students will be invalidated if community members and potential employers question the academic integrity of the alternative education program.

effects include marginal participation in work, further education and training and skill development (Zyngier 2003), with a consequent higher likelihood of future reliance on government assistance (Peace 2006). This in turn increases the risk of extended social dislocation, and physical and mental health problems (Mission Australia 2006). Additionally, research demonstrates a positive relationship between truancy and crime, as well as between failure to complete high school and criminal activity (Purdie & Buckley 2010). Even in the event of achieving full-time employment, adults who have not completed school earn less than those who have fully completed their formal schooling (Alexander, Entwisle & Kabbani 2001). As reported by Curtis and McMillan (2008), the majority of school non-completers in Australia find employment in the “blue collar” work industry; however, the availability of this type of employment opportunity is highly dependent on the health of the economy.

The consequences of disengagement are magnified for Indigenous communities in that the proportion of Indigenous young Australians not fully engaged in work or training is almost three times that of non-Indigenous teenagers. The unemployment rate for Indigenous young Australians is twice that of non-Indigenous youth, and Indigenous young people face a greater range of difficulties in finding secure and meaningful employment opportunities (Mission Australia 2006).

Addressing disengagement through alternative approaches

In light of the serious consequences of disengagement, and the political push to increase retention rates, a wide variety of alternative learning programs have been developed in Australia (see, for example, Te Riele 2007), particularly in the last decade. There is a growing realisation that flexible and socially inclusive education services are a necessary component of engaging those young people who face the most challenges in fulfilling the “learning or earning” agenda of the current educational climate. The

COAG National Partnership Agreement (2008) highlights three main areas of reform focus – multiple learning pathways, career development, and mentoring – which are intended to maximise student engagement and attainment, and align well with an alternative approach to schooling.

Alternative education is a term used to broadly encompass educational activities that fall outside the traditional schooling system (Aron 2006). In the Australian context, it commonly refers to programs serving vulnerable youth who are no longer enrolled in mainstream schools. The academic integrity of alternative programs has been questioned in the past, primarily because of the emphasis placed on attainment of “basic skills” and vocational education training. There have been calls for long-term studies of student outcomes to ensure that students are transitioning from alternative programs to either further education or meaningful employment (Lange & Sletten 2002). With little data available in this area, it is indeed difficult to gauge the success of alternative programs, except via anecdotal reports from those working in the field. However, it is also important to note that students, their families, schools and outside institutions may all have different perceptions of “success”.

Establishing the integrity of alternative programs is essential to ensure their survival, as many programs (particularly in the public sector) rely heavily on government funding to meet operational costs and must demonstrate the ability to operate within an accountability framework (Queensland Department of Education and the Arts (DETA) 2004). In addition, and perhaps most importantly, the learning experiences of students will be invalidated if community members and potential employers question the academic integrity of the alternative education program. If alternative programs are conceptualised by the wider public as “second best” to mainstream schooling (Te Riele 2008), there is a strong likelihood that students themselves will become aware of this deficit view and will devalue their own educational experience as not comparable to that of mainstream schooling.

Re-engagement and flexible learning options in Queensland

Reforms to the senior phase of learning designed to improve student engagement and retention gathered momentum in the state of Queensland in 2002 under the influence of the Queensland 'Smart State' strategy, which incorporated a renewed emphasis on education, employment, training and youth affairs (Harrevald & Singh 2011). The Education and Training Reform (ETRF) agenda saw the 2006 passing of the *Youth Participation in Education and Training Act 2003*, which included a legal requirement for young people to remain formally enrolled in education and training until the age of 17 with a concomitant promise to "enhance learning options that provide greater flexibility to meet the needs of even more 15–17-year-olds" (DETA 2004). The enactment of this agenda saw the provision of sizeable funding to support strategies and programs catering for those students considered at serious risk of disengaging from education or training.

In 2003, the Queensland Department of Education and the Arts conducted the Flexible Learning Services Survey, which reviewed the education services responding to young people who had disengaged or were at risk of disengaging from mainstream schooling (DETA 2004). The survey identified a total of 121 services and indicated that a range of flexible learning services were being offered in Queensland including services within state schools; annexes to state schools providing long-term education programs; flexi schools (state and non-state); community-based youth services; short and long-term education, training and employment preparation programs; Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and other training providers; and behaviour management programs (DETA 2004).

In 2009, The Youth Affairs Network of Queensland (YANQ) provided a snapshot of Queensland's re-engagement services, which involved a survey of 128 services that were categorised into different types based on their focus and aims. Services related specifically to the provision of educational

support include flexi schools (government), flexi schools (NGO), community-based VET, TAFE–school linkage and in-school support. Additional programs identified included mentoring, teaching culture, wilderness programs, youth justice learning programs and community-based learning (Powell & Shafiq 2009).

In 2010, Edmund Rice Education Australia (EREA) established the Youth+ organisation which administers a suite of flexible education initiatives including the Edmund Rice Education Australia Flexible Learning Centre Network (EREAFLCN) in Queensland, as well as programs tailored specifically for young people in care and for those requiring support to transition to further education and training (EREA 2010). The Youth+ suite of programs currently cater for the following young people:

- those who have had contact with the juvenile justice system;
- those in the care of the Department of Child Safety;
- those with a history of extended periods of unexplained absences;
- those who are Indigenous;
- those who are highly mobile;
- those who have had repeated difficulty conforming to the behaviour requirements of mainstream education and training;
- those with mental illness or at risk of engaging in self-harming behaviours or substance abuse;
- those with chronic illness leading to extended absences;
- those who have been excluded from school;
- those who are homeless;
- those who are young parents;
- those who have repeatedly suffered from severe negative schooling experiences;
- those with a generational history of early school leaving; and
- those searching for a different educational experience (EREA 2010, p.3).

While providing a comprehensive and growing suite of programs, Youth+ have highlighted concerns in meeting the current demand for flexible learning options, with

more than 2,000 young people on waiting lists in Queensland (EREA 2010). There is unquestionably a need for further expansion of quality, flexible learning programs to cater for an increasing number of young people who find themselves disenfranchised from the mainstream schooling experience.

Best practice alternative education approaches

The provision of a wide range of flexible learning options, as indicated in the surveys reported above, results in diversity rather than homogeneity in relation to the goals of programs, student demographics, program resources and facilities, management and administration models and relationships with mainstream education and community agencies. This makes a concise definition of “what works” for disengaged young people problematic, but a number of authors have attempted to highlight elements of best practice, which both engage and improve the educational and social outcomes of marginalised young people.

Spielhofer et al. (2005) have identified the following characteristics as best practice in the delivery of projects and activities for disengaged young people:

- offering activities that are meaningful and relevant that they can participate in voluntarily;
- delivering learning in an environment that is not like a school;
- providing one-on-one support for young people, tailored to individual needs and circumstances;
- employing staff with the skills and qualities necessary to develop meaningful and supportive relationships with young people; and
- establishing strong links with schools and other agencies to support the transition of young people into further education or training.

In relation to alternative programs that operate formally as schools, some of the traits commonly attributed to successful educative programs have been identified as that of:

- choice – voluntary participation by teachers, students and families;
- autonomy and control – horizontal rather than vertical hierarchy of authority and decision-making;
- curriculum and skills – curriculum relevant to students’ needs and life experiences; and
- spirit of common enterprise – purposeful emphasis on school as community (Raywid 1982).

Additionally, authors such as Lange and Sletten (2002) and Leadbeater (2008) emphasise the importance of providing integrated, relevant and individualised learning plans for marginalised young people attending alternative education settings. As a local Australian exemplar, the education model that underpins the EREAFLCN approach integrates these characteristics through an emphasis on flexible pedagogy and incorporation of a learning framework that is relevant and responsive. This learning framework “emerges from openness, negotiation, experimentation and the interaction of mindsets which seek the common good of the young person within a context of individual skills and potential” (EREA 2010, p.5). Learning choices within the framework encompass the whole of the young person’s needs and incorporate literacy and numeracy skills, creative arts and technology, vocational and employment-focused outcomes, sport and recreation activities, relationship development and community participation. The intention is to enable young people to develop an appropriate skill base that will empower them to fully participate in community life (EREA 2010).

Mills and McGregor’s (2010) recent study examined best practice from the perspectives of the young people who attend alternative education settings in Queensland and found that students consistently identified the following as of key importance:

- learning programs – opportunities to undertake traditional subjects and curricula as well as workplace training and access to vocational qualifications;

- learning environment – relaxed school climate, flexibility, staff–student dialogue and negotiation, voluntary attendance, sense of community; and
- teaching relationships – accepting students for who they are, respect between staff and students, young people feeling “celebrated”, receiving sufficient time and assistance to complete work, “connected” and “conversational” teaching strategies.

To guide best-practice curriculum delivery in alternative education settings, Mills and McGregor (2010) provided recommendations which indicated that there should be:

- provision of appropriate curricula that suit the needs of students and provide them with pathways towards work and further education;
- flexibility to develop diverse curricula responsive to the needs and aspirations of young people who choose to attend alternative settings; and
- curricula connected to young people’s worlds that value the diversity of the student population while maintaining concern with learning that is intellectually challenging (refer to Wilson & Stemp (2010) for a practical example of the application of a place-based learning approach to engage young people attending an alternative setting).

Mills and McGregor (2010, p.9) also note the importance of alternative education settings acting in the capacity of “full-service” schools. This service requires cooperation between alternative schools and welfare agencies in order to provide wraparound services such as “the provision of crèches, housing support, advocacy services, meals and physical and mental health counselling”.

The provision of transport assistance is also an important component of alternative approaches, and a key recommendation of Mission Australia’s Youth Employment Strategy Report (2006) is to encourage greater use of mobile outreach service delivery options, particularly in rural and remote areas, to both reduce social exclusion and enable the provision of integrated

employment, training and community service to young people.

The ideal alternative school

By summarising the best-practice literature it is possible to construct a picture of what the ideal alternative school might look like in the modern educational context. It would, in the first instance, be physically located within the community place of the young people it is intended to serve. This would enable a strengthening of the ties between school and community and make possible an exchange of resources and capital. If possible, the school would employ teaching and non-teaching staff from the same community to further strengthen local bonds. Student numbers would be limited to a maximum of 100 students (preferably fewer) to enable the development of a cohesive inner-school community and the fostering of personalised relationships between staff and students. Teaching staff would be highly qualified professionals with experience in working with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. They would have the necessary skills to identify the strengths that each student brings to the educational setting and would be able to develop individualised learning plans to ensure that each young person reached their full potential. Teaching staff themselves would be supported by a range of qualified support staff such as youth workers and guidance counsellors to ensure that young people achieve both academic and social outcomes. Diverse cultural backgrounds and other dimensions of difference would be celebrated as a rich component of the cultural fabric of the school. The school itself would operate in an open and democratic manner that would invite participation by marginalised young people and their families. This would then fulfil the primary criteria of the successful alternative school – that young people choose to attend and to actively re-engage with the learning process.

If possible, the school would employ teaching and non-teaching staff from the same community to further strengthen local bonds.

Conclusion and recommendations

Current inadequate methods of tracking young people who have disengaged from

formal schooling, particularly very early school leavers, make it difficult to ascertain the exact numbers of young people who have fallen through the cracks of the mainstream schooling system. However, the data that are available indicate that youth disengagement remains a significant social concern, and this is verified by the experiences of alternative service providers who find themselves unable to meet the growing demand from young people, which at times results in extensive waiting lists such as those experienced by the Youth+ organisation (EREA 2010).

While it is highly concerning that many young people are currently not engaged in either education or training, the creation of a successful alternative program is one that cannot be rushed for the sake of expediency. Successful programs are built on the foundation of a well-defined philosophy that integrates the principles of best-practice alternative approaches and clearly articulates to both staff and students the nature, purpose and intent of the program.

Mills and McGregor (2010) make a very clear point that alternative schooling sites are not aspiring to mainstream models and neither are they behaviour management centres or “dumping grounds” for troublesome students. The authors state:

... the alternative practices of flexible learning centres should be supported as models of effective teaching and be used to inform practices within mainstream schools (Mills & McGregor 2010, p.10).

In order for this to be accomplished, alternative programs must continue to embrace a holistic and integrated approach to teaching and learning that encompasses the entire needs of the marginalised young person. This requires consideration of:

- physical structures (such as well-equipped school buildings that allow for the provision of diverse curricula options e.g. kitchens and manual work spaces);
- transport/mobile services (such as vans with appropriate carrying capacity);
- staffing (appropriately qualified teaching, welfare and support staff);

- strategic planning (long-term vision for the program); and
- curriculum (best-practice curriculum and culturally responsive pedagogy).

To implement a “full service” program, it is often necessary to enlist the assistance of local agencies, which may work in partnership to enable the provision of this additional support for young people. Partnerships can also reduce the burden of funding alternative programs, which remains a persistent issue for most service providers (McGregor & Mills 2010) as the intense support provided for young people is costly in relation to human resources. Community support is also critical to the long-term success of the program as “education is, at its essence, learning about life through participation and relationship in community” (Cajete 1994, p.25). Participation, relationship and community must always remain central to the alternative approach.

References

- Alexander, K.L., Entwisle, D.R. & Kabbani, N.S. 2001, ‘The dropout process in life course perspective: Early risk factors at home and school’, *Teachers College Record*, v.103, n.5, pp.760-822.
- Aron, L.Y. 2006, *An overview of alternative education*, U.S Department of Labor and The Urban Institute, Washington.
- Cajete, G. 1994, *Look to the mountain: An ecology of Indigenous education*, Kivaki Press, Durango.
- Council of Australian Governments 2009, *National partnership agreement on youth attainment and transitions*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.
- Croninger, R.G. & Lee, V.E. 2001, ‘Social capital and dropping out of high school: Benefits to at-risk students of teachers’ support and guidance’, *Teachers College Record*, v.103, n.4, pp.548-81.
- Curtis, D. & McMillan, J. 2008, *School non-completers: Profiles and initial destinations*, Longitudinal Studies of Australian Youth (LSAY) Report 54. Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2010, *Compact with young Australians*, DEEWR, retrieved from, <<http://www.deewr.gov.au/Youth/YouthAttainmentandTransitions/Pages/compact.aspx>>.
- Edmund Rice Education Australia 2010, *Youth + Foundation document*, EREA, Brisbane.

- Harrevald, B. & Singh, M. 2011, *Queensland's education and training reforms for the future: The journey so far in the senior phase of learning*, report prepared for the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Brisbane.
- Lange, C. & Sletten, S.J. 2002, *Alternative education: A brief history and research synthesis*, report prepared for Project Forum, Alexandria, VA.
- Leadbeater, C. 2008, *What's next? 21 ideas for 21st century learning*, report prepared for the Innovation Unit, UK, retrieved from, <<http://www.innovationunit.org/about-us/publications/whats-next.html>>.
- Mills, M. & McGregor, G. 2010, *Re-engaging students in education: Success factors in alternative education*, report on a research project conducted for Youth Affairs Network Queensland (YANQ), Brisbane.
- Mission Australia 2006, *Youth employment strategy*, Mission Australia Research and Social Policy in partnership with the Youth Strategy and Advocacy Group (YSAG), retrieved from, <<http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/downloads/social-policy-reports/199-youth-employment-strategy-yes>>.
- Peace, D. 2006, *Chronic school absence, truancy and disengagement: Exploring the nature and extent of chronic absence behaviour/truancy in four Logan secondary schools and its impact on educational engagement and juvenile crime*, Department of Housing, Brisbane.
- Powell, D. & Shafiq, T. 2009, *A snapshot of Queensland's re-engagement services*, a report prepared for YANQ, Brisbane.
- Purdie, N. & Buckley, S. 2010, *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*, issues paper no.1 produced for the Closing the Gap Clearing House, Canberra.
- Queensland Department of Education and the Arts (DETA) 2004, *Education and training reforms for the future: Results from a survey of flexible learning services*, DETA, Brisbane.
- Raywid, M.A. 1982, *The current status of schools of choice in public secondary education: Alternative, options, magnets*, Project on Alternatives in Education, New York.
- Robinson, L. & Lamb, S. 2009, *How young people are faring 09: The national report on the learning and work situation of young Australians*, report prepared for the Foundation of Young Australians, Melbourne.
- Smyth, J. 2002, 'Social capital and the "socially just school ... in the context of the devolving school', paper presented to the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Brisbane.
- Spielhofer, T., White, G., O'Donnell, L. & Sims, D. 2005, *Determined to succeed and young people at risk of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training)*, Scottish Executive Social Research and the Department of Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning, Edinburgh.
- Te Riele, K. 2007, 'Educational alternatives for marginalised youth', *The Australian Educational Researcher*, v.34, n.3, pp.53-68.
- 2008, 'Are alternative schools the answer?', *New Transitions: Re-Engagement Edition*, v.12, n.1.
- Wilson, K. & Stemp, K. 2010, 'Science education in a "classroom without walls": Connecting young people via place', *Teaching Science*, v.56, n.1, pp.6-10.
- Zyngier, D. 2003, "'Hanging out – hanging on – hanging in" or is it "elect out, drift out and driven out": What works for at-risk students – how a connected or generative pedagogy improves student educational outcomes for all but in particular for marginalised students', paper presented at the Australian Curriculum Studies Association Biennial National Conference September 2003, Adelaide.

AUTHORS

Kimberley Wilson is a primary school teacher with postgraduate qualifications in Community Development. She is currently completing her doctoral studies at James Cook University, Townsville.

Kellie Stemp is a secondary science teacher, with a Masters in Education degree. Kellie has worked for the Edmund Rice Education Australia Flexible Learning Centre Network for the past six years.

Sue McGinty is the Associate Dean of Research for the Faculty of Arts, Education, and Social Sciences (incorporating the School of Indigenous Australian Studies) at James Cook University, Townsville.