The central question that this paper addresses is: How do ‘alternative’ schools meet the needs of young people disengaged from the mainstream schooling sector? The concept of alternative education has a long history located within a progressive tradition in education (Dewey, 1966). However, the term has become a slippery one and is currently used to denote a multitude of practices and sites (see te Riele 2007). It is used for instance to describe schools located within the democratic schooling movement and to describe behaviour management units designed to modify students’ (mis)behaviours so that they are better suited to mainstream schools (see for example, te Riele 2006, Thomson & Russell, 2009). This paper is concerned with those alternative schools that seek to cater to the needs of young people who are unlikely to return to the mainstream sector for various reasons. Such schools contrast with various systemic schools set up to cater to young people suspended and expelled from their former schools that have as their purpose ‘disciplining’ the young person into being a ‘normal’ student. Thus, the focus of this research is on schools that are not so much concerned with changing the student, but instead focus on changing the kinds of teaching and learning that young people engage in. Such schools are an important feature of the educational landscape in many countries (see for example, Ross & Gray, 2005). However, whilst these schools meet the needs of some of the most marginalised young people in society and some of those who have had a traumatic relationship with mainstream schooling, there are also other young people still in mainstream schools who are disengaged from the learning process and have very little connection to their school. It will be argued here that there is much that mainstream schools can learn from ‘successful’ alternative schools in order to provide an education that caters to a wide range of students.
There are multiple reasons why some students disengage from mainstream schooling (Mosen-Lowe, Vidovich & Chapman, 2009). These include the rigidity of schools which do not recognise the complex lives led by many young people, the authority structures within schools, and often, to these students, irrelevant and meaningless curricula and pedagogical practices. This disengagement can have serious consequences for young people who already come from some of the most marginalised sectors of society (Savelsberg & Martin-Giles, 2008). In this paper we draw on data collected from a diverse group of alternative schools in the Australian State of Queensland to identify some of the practices within these schools that have engaged marginalised young people. Striking within these schools are the large numbers of students who despite having rejected mainstream schooling are prepared to make significant efforts to attend their ?alternative? school. The commitment to attending these schools that many students demonstrate leads us to conclude, as one participant in the study indicated, that there need to be more schools like these.

Method

The research sites for this project were purposively selected to represent diverse forms of alternative schooling within one local area. Supporting the selection of the schools was an advisory body consisting of members representing various youth organisations, educational bodies and charity groups in Queensland. The visits to the sites lasted for approximately one week and involved observations, interviews (focus and individual) with young people, workers and the sites, in some instance parents, and former students, and the collection of various documents from the school. In accordance with the democratic notions of schooling, a forum was also held with the young people from the various sites entitled ?have we heard you correctly?? where they were given opportunities to comment upon the early findings form the study. This forum has also acted as a data source.

Expected Outcomes

A significant outcome of this project will be to provide an understanding of the processes that support the learnings of young people who have been marginalised from the mainstream schooling sector. Regardless of the reasons, young people who are suspended or excluded from school due to behavioural issues still have a right to an education. Research carried out in the UK (Thomson & Russell, 2009) argues that school cultures, curriculum and practices are all implicated in student disengagement and behaviour and therefore educational authorities have a duty to ensure that all children have access to a high quality education. This project will facilitate the carrying out of such a duty. It will also benefit alternative schools by providing feedback as to the kinds of practices that are of most benefit to the students who attend them. Additional benefits arising from the project have been the mapping of alternative sites, the close relationship developing between educational researchers and youth work professionals concerned with young disengaged people?s educational needs, and the foregrounding of the successes of democratic principles of schooling.

References


You are invited to upload your full text. Conditions for online publication and submission form here

Author Information

Glenda McGregor (submitting/presenting)

Griffith University

School of Education and Professional Studies

Brisbane, QLD

Martin Mills

The University of Queensland

Brisbane, QLD