



Teaching in alternative and flexible education settings (Editorial)

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Special Issue Guest Editorial: Teaching in alternative and flexible education settings

Martin Mills, Kitty te Riele, Glenda McGregor and Aspa Baroutsis

Introduction

In both pre-service and in-service teacher education there is increasing recognition of the diverse settings in which teachers work. Despite the power of default discourses of ‘what schools are’ (see Johnston & Hayes, 2008; Tyack & Cuban, 1995) the educational landscape is varied in terms of organisational structures and educational approaches.

This special issue takes as its starting point the diversity of educational provision at secondary school level – and focuses on one specific set of providers: alternative and flexible education settings. These schools and programs are aimed at young people who – for whatever reason – are unlikely to complete upper secondary qualifications (‘Year 12’ in Australia) in more traditional settings but who nevertheless would like to achieve such educational credentials (Mills & McGregor, 2014; Te Riele, 2007). Recent policy and economic pressures – not only in Australia (CoAG, 2009) but also internationally (e.g. European Union, 2011) – have led to increased demand for such alternative pathways to school completion. As a result, in many countries alternative and flexible education settings are now a small but significant part of the education sector in which teachers work. This makes an investigation of teaching in these settings of interest in its own right, as recognition of the relevance of these settings as workplaces and the implications for pre-service and in-service teacher education to support teachers’ work in these sites.

Moreover, these settings are of interest as incubators of change and as showcases of innovation. They share an intention to change the way education is offered, since previous schooling experiences did not work well for their students. Much of the onus for this changed approach is on the staff: teachers as well as youth workers and other support staff. To borrow Richard Teese’s (2006) phrase: these staff are ‘condemned to innovate’. Staff in these schools have a willingness to change default schooling practices and find out what works best for their students. They also are well-placed to try out different approaches, due to the smaller size of these schools and programs, and the acceptance of their different purpose by students, teachers, parents and even the relevant ‘quality assurance’ inspectorate.

The work of educators in alternative and flexible education settings therefore has the potential to inform change in mainstream schooling. The reforms that make schooling work better for marginalised students in these programs can improve schooling for most students in regular schools as well. However, too often alternative programs are seen as marginal to mainstream schooling. The questions posed by Holdsworth over a decade ago are still relevant: “Are we ready to recognise that the educational learnings from these ‘alternatives’ need to ‘come in from the cold’? Are we ready to shift these practices from the margins to the centre of what we do?” (2004, p.12).

Overview of the special issue

The papers in this special issue are all based on research located in Australia. They resonate, however, with experiences worldwide. A (necessarily limited) indication of the international interest in alternative and flexible learning settings includes the work of Aron (2006) in the USA, Thomson (2014) in the UK, Brooking and Gardiner (2009) in New Zealand, and Nagata (2006) for the Asia Pacific region. The wide ranging references used in each of the papers further reinforce this global relevance. Finally, in their Foreword Jennifer Vadeboncoeur (University of British Columbia, Canada) and Paulo Padilla-Petry (University of Barcelona, Spain) provide valuable international perspectives.

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The core of the special issue purposely commences with an article foregrounding Indigenous knowledges. In countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA, the historically poor education experienced by Indigenous peoples has led both to a need of alternative and flexible learning settings for this group and a recognition within such settings of the rich insights available to their work from Indigenous traditions. In her article titled “Emerging ideas for innovation in Indigenous education: A research synthesis of Indigenous educative roles in mainstream and flexi schools” Marnee Shay draws on her own positionality as an Aboriginal educator and researcher. As she argues, the relatively high numbers of both Indigenous staff and students in flexible learning settings offer the opportunity to learn from those experiences to inform broader educational improvements for Indigenous young people. A finding of particular interest is in relation to the roles of Indigenous staff: targeted as an Indigenous Education Worker or more generally as a teacher, aide, or wellbeing worker who is also Indigenous. In mainstream schools the former is more common, while in flexible learning settings the latter was quite usual.

In his article “Symbolic non-violence in the work of teachers in alternative education settings” Richard Waters explores the nature of the relationships with students fostered by teachers in alternative and flexible learning settings. Waters argues that these relationships tend to be inclusive and supportive rather than disciplinary and authoritarian. Data from three sites illustrate the nature and effects of alternative education practices. By inverting the Bourdieuan concept of ‘symbolic violence’ to considerations of ‘symbolic non-violence’ in these relationships, the paper offers a fruitful conceptual lens for exploring teachers’ work. Findings show how the alternative education settings that form the fieldwork sites included structures, practices and relationships which could be described as symbolic non-violence. A specific element explored in some depth is the reduction of pressures on students to compete against each other.

Ann Morgan’s paper “Cultivating critical reflection: Educators making sense and meaning of professional identity and relational dynamics in complex practice” takes as its starting point that critical reflection forms the foundation for socially just and inclusive practices in non-traditional flexi schools. Morgan outlines her model of relational dynamics to understand educator identity and development in the context of multi-disciplinary staff teams in alternative and flexible learning settings. The model consists of three interacting elements: relational being, relational agency and relational equity. Findings from questionnaire data with staff from five sites demonstrate how the model of relational dynamics connects with the perceptions of practice of staff, and highlights the way the model can be used to explore identity and development within multidisciplinary staff teams.

In the fourth paper “Exploring the affective dimension of teachers’ work in alternative school settings”, the guest editors Kitty te Riele, Martin Mills, Glenda McGregor and Aspa Baroutsis also focus on the centrality of the quality of relationships between and amongst teachers and students in schools. The paper draws on a range of literature to offer a novel combination of three conceptual tools: affective justice, ethics of care and affective labour. Applying these tools to data (mainly staff interviews) from three sites, the paper outlines specific affective practices by staff in terms of persona; connections, care for learning and for wellbeing, and offering second chances. The analysis also highlights that this affective labour is ‘hard work’, and is enabled by the intrinsic rewards staff experience as well as by the care they receive from students, and by collegiality and supportive leadership. The paper concludes that the redefinition of schooling as inherently ‘relational’ implies forms of teacher activism that transcend the obligation to student ‘well-being’ as commonly understood in mainstream settings.

Finally, Vicky Plows’ paper “Reworking or reaffirming practice? Perceptions of professional learning in alternative and flexible education settings” explicitly addresses in-service learning opportunities for staff in alternative and flexible learning settings. The findings explore the use by surveyed and interviewed staff (teachers as well as leaders and wellbeing staff) of professional learning through external provision, internal interactions with colleagues, and collaborations across flexible learning programs. Plows points to the preference by many staff for contextual and situated, collaborative and collegial professional learning opportunities. She

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concludes that this matches characteristics of powerful professional learning identified in literature, but cautions there is risk here of affirmation over innovation.

Concluding thoughts

Several common threads run through these papers, highlighting core aspects of the work of staff in these settings. First, is the strong sense of commitment, even 'vocation', for working with and for young people from marginalised backgrounds. Some of these staff are 'refugees' from traditional schools, just like many of their students. The contexts of alternative and flexible learning settings place specific demands on staff, for example in terms of emotional labour and of working closely with colleagues from a variety of professional backgrounds. At the same time, these contexts also showcase how such commitment (which is shared by many teachers across the educational landscape) may be enabled and harnessed for the benefit of students. Secondly, the validation of the relational and emotional nature of education, as a fundamentally people-centred enterprise forms the foundation. Next, several papers highlight the importance of explicit attention to critical reflection on one's own positionality, assumptions and identity. Finally, collegiality plays a crucially affirming role, with collaboration emphasised not only for students but for staff within multi-disciplinary teams. These elements are all pertinent to educational settings everywhere but are apt to be lost amid the maelstrom of demands on teachers from accountability-driven mainstream educational policies. Thus, the papers in this special issue serve as a reminder of what really 'counts' for our young people and their schooling.

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