

Re-engaging Students in Education: Success Factors in Alternative Schools

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RE-ENGAGING STUDENTS IN EDUCATION

Success Factors in Alternative Schools

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youth affairs network qld



RE-ENGAGING STUDENTS IN EDUCATION

Success Factors in Alternative Schools

By Martin Mills and Glenda McGregor, May 2010

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SUBJECTS: EDUCATION; CHILD AND YOUTH STUDIES; SOCIAL SERVICES AND WELFARE

**REPORT ON A RESEARCH PROJECT
CONDUCTED FOR THE YOUTH AFFAIRS
NETWORK OF QUEENSLAND.**

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FOREWORD

The genesis of this report goes back at least to 2003 with the publication of a discussion paper entitled “What are Schools for”. In that report, the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland Inc (YANQ) welcomed the Beattie Government’s plans to fund community organisations to employ youth workers in schools around Queensland. In the same report however we also called for greater support for young people who were marginalised from education and not attending schools (and therefore unable to benefit from the support of youth workers in schools).

Since that report, YANQ has continued to agitate for greater support for young people who are disengaged from schooling through a range of publications and research projects, such as the following:

- Let’s Invite Everyone, a discussion paper written to encourage discussion and debate about the ETRF process (2004).
- Submissions to the State Government’s review of Education Laws in Queensland (2005 and 2006).
- A small research project to assess the level and nature of support that was available for young people (12 to 18) who were disengaged from education and work (2007).

This last project highlighted the inconsistent (and in some cases non-existent) levels of support for young people who had become disengaged from education and were rarely, if ever, attending school. Based on this research YANQ made the decision to commit significant time and energy into improving our advocacy for young people marginalised from education – and so the **Re-engagement Project**¹ was born.

1. Further details are available at www.yanq.org.au/reengage.

The Re-engagement Project has had 3 ambitious goals:

- To map re-engagement services available to young Queenslanders – i.e. services that supported young people to re-engage with meaningful learning of some form.
- Encourage a deeper understanding within the youth sector, governments and the community about disengagement and the types of re-engagement services that can work in different communities.
- Develop, articulate and publish models of successful re-engagement services.

The first goal was achieved to some extent by conducting a Census of Re-engagement Services in Queensland - the results of which are available on YANQ's website at www.yanq.org.au/reengage/2173-census.

The second goal was achieved through the publication of a special 'Re-engagement' edition of new Transitions (see www.yanq.org.au/reengage/nt2008) featuring 23 articles by youth workers, young people, academics and program coordinators. To encourage discussion in the youth and education sectors YANQ also worked with a range of partners to hold forums and seminars in Moreton Bay and Townsville in 2008 and in North Brisbane in February 2010.

This research report then is the beginning of YANQ's attempt to achieve the 3rd goal.

The impetus for the research came from the talented group of youth workers, educators and academics who, at YANQ's invitation, formed a steering committee to help us investigate successful models of re-engagement for young people.

It wasn't long, perhaps one or two meetings of the committee, before the topic of 'flexi' or 'alternative' schools was raised and suggestions were made to investigate these in more detail.

In those early meetings it became clear through the stories we heard and the research reports we read that for many young people who have become disengaged from mainstream schooling, 'flexi' schools offer a viable alternative. Indeed as you will read in the report many young people expend significant efforts to attend these schools when (on the surface at least) it might seem easier for them to enrol at their nearest State High School.

With this in mind and after much discussion the steering committee agreed to work together to investigate what it was exactly that attracted young people to these so-called 'alternative' schools – what are the factors that enable these schools to support and engage young people who would otherwise remain disengaged from education?

In seeking some answers to this question, one of the central aims throughout this project has been to consider which, if any, of these factors can be transferred to 'mainstream' schooling. YANQ doesn't believe in establishing an 'alternative' system of schooling, but rather in building a diverse schooling system. That is, a system in which a diverse range of school types are all encouraged (through funding and other means) to do everything they can to support young people from all backgrounds and in all situations to remain engaged and excited by the opportunities that an education provides.

We hope this report goes some way towards achieving that aim.

David Powell

Steering Committee Convenor

Youth Affairs Network of Queensland

Foreword (cont.)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research project would not have been possible without the support and dedication of a number of individuals and organisations.

Firstly thanks must go to the young people at each of the five sites who shared their views, opinions and insights with us. Thanks also to the staff and volunteers at those sites for their openness and willingness to share their perspectives with us.

YANQ also expresses its gratitude to the members of the steering committee who have guided the course of this research project from the beginning and contributed invaluable advice, wisdom and support. The members of the steering committee are:

- Ms Linda Llewellyn, Brisbane Catholic Education
- Dr Glenda McGregor, Griffith University
- Prof Martin Mills, University of Queensland
- Ms Frances Missen, Brisbane City Council and Albert Park Flexible Learning Centre
- Mr David Powell, Youth Affairs Network of Queensland (convenor)
- Ms Maren Strachen, YWCA Brisbane
- Dr Sandra Taylor, Queensland University of Technology
- Ms Bernadette Wood, Brisbane Catholic Education

Secondly, the research would not have been possible without the in-kind support from the following organisations:

- Brisbane Catholic Education.
- Brisbane City Council and Albert Park Flexible Learning Centre.
- Centre for Learning Innovation, Queensland University of Technology.
- School of Education, University of Queensland.
- School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University.
- YWCA Brisbane.

YANQ also expresses thanks to Ms Rachel Martin, a LOTE teacher and post-graduate psychology student who volunteered her time to conduct interviews for the research.

Thanks also to Ms Marilyn Topp, whose keen eye for grammar and punctuation was that important bit of spit and polish the report needed.

Finally YANQ would also like to thank the Queensland Government Department of Communities for the funding it provides to YANQ and which assisted us to undertake this project.

ABOUT THE YOUTH AFFAIRS NETWORK OF QUEENSLAND



youth affairs network qld

The Youth Affairs Network of Queensland Inc. (YANQ) is the peak community youth affairs organisation in Queensland, representing individuals and organisations from Queensland's youth sector.

We promote the interests and well being of young people across the state by:

- disseminating information to members, the youth sector, and the broader community
- undertaking campaigns and lobbying
- making representations to government and other influential bodies
- resourcing regional and issues-based networks
- consulting and liaising with members and the field
- linking with key state and national bodies
- initiating projects
- hosting forums and conferences
- input into policy development
- enhancing the professional development of the youth sector

We advocate on behalf of young people in Queensland, especially disadvantaged young people, to government and the community.

We promote and support cultural diversity. We encourage the development of policies and programs that respond to the rights and needs of young people.

YANQ employs a small team in its Brisbane based secretariat. The organisation is managed by a committee.

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KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Enrolment and attendance

The young people in this study indicated a diversity of personal circumstances and reasons for attending flexi schools/centres. However, broader socio-economic factors were clearly significant. Many of these young people had experienced considerable family mobility, homelessness and parenthood. The age range of students that these schools catered to was broad, ranging from early teens through to early 20s. Many were returning to education after a long absence.

The flexible learning sites visited did not just cater to the academic needs of young people. They also often provided counselling, assistance with finding accommodation and financial resources, and help with child care and personal advocacy. They had a strong resemblance to what has been termed 'full service schools'.

A core aspect of all of the centres, many of which had waiting lists, was that attendance was voluntary. The centres did not want to be sites where young people were compelled to attend. However, knowledge of these sites and other learning centres, programs, schooling options, learning opportunities and pathways did not appear to be widely available to educational

authorities and other organisations serving young people in Queensland.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Cooperation between schools (including educational sectors) and welfare agencies needs to occur in order to provide young people in need with opportunities to attend full service schools. This would include, for example, the provision of crèches, housing support, advocacy services, meals and physical and mental health counselling.
- Policies of welfare payments to young people re-entering education facilities, such as those described in this report, need to be cognisant of flexible learning opportunities that can occur off-site and thus reduce daily attendance for on-site learning.
- Students should not be compelled to attend such centres. Attendance at flexible learning centres should be a voluntary decision made by young people (sometimes with their carers) and not be used by schools as an alternative to suspensions or exclusions but offered to young people as viable choices.
- A thorough mapping of the existing educational services available to young people and the pathways and curricula they provide needs to be commissioned.

Key findings and recommendations (cont.)

Enrolment and attendance

School environment

- Education authorities need to consider allocating central office staff to work with flexible learning centres to facilitate the provision of high quality learning environments that cater to the needs of marginalised young people and that are consistent with the flexible learning philosophies of these sites.
- An awareness campaign about these sites needs to occur to ensure that young people know of their existence, to encourage support to be given to the people attending (through student discounts on buses, movies etc.), and to promote a positive image in the community of these sites and the young people enrolled in them.
- Further research needs to occur on disengaged young people who are no longer receiving any formal education and on their perspectives on effective schooling.

School environment

Most of the young people interviewed who had rejected mainstream schooling were highly engaged with the learning opportunities provided to them at these sites. This engagement appeared to be linked to combination of factors related to the curricula offered, pedagogical practices employed, staff relationships with young people and the philosophies underpinning each centre's organisation. For instance, students indicated that they preferred the smaller schools/classes offered by flexi schools/centres and most were critical of various aspects of curricula, pedagogy and teacher/student relationships experienced at their previous schools.

Within these sites there was an absence of 'behaviour management' discourse. It was indicated by staff within these sites that they did not want to be places where young people were sent as punishment for not appearing to fit in with mainstream schools or to be 'rehabilitated'. The rules at the various centres tended to be far more relaxed than those found in mainstream schools, especially around attendance, uniforms, lateness and assessment deadlines. For the young people interviewed the enforcement of school rules in the mainstream often led to early school leaving. However, it was not the actual rules that seemed to be problematic but the ways in which they were enforced. All of the flexi schools/centres visited had rules but these were applied within a context of dialogue with students. Concerns were raised by some staff within larger flexible learning centres about the risk of drifting towards more mainstream practices in respect to uniform and disciplinary procedures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Educational authorities need to recognise that class size and staff-student ratios do make a difference, and especially so for young people marginalised within schools.
- Flexible learning centres should be constructed as viable alternatives to mainstream education, and be recognised as providers of rich forms of curricula and teaching practices. They should not be utilised as behaviour management centres.
- Mainstream schools should not be seen as 'the model' for alternative sites to aspire towards.
- The alternative practices of flexible learning centres should be supported as models of effective teaching and used to inform practices within mainstream schools.
- A longitudinal research study needs to be funded that investigates student behaviours in flexible learning centres and the ways in which staff respond to them. Such a study would provide data to inform practices in mainstream schools.

Curriculum

The curricula offerings at the flexible learning sites provided opportunities for young people across the sites to access traditional subjects and curricula through undertaking Queensland Studies Authority subjects. There was also a focus on learning work skills and providing opportunities for experience in local workplaces. There were also opportunities to combine regular subjects with a program focusing on obtaining vocational certificates, for instance, certificates in retail and construction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Flexible learning centres need to be supported in offering appropriate curricula that suit the needs of students and provide them with pathways towards work and further education.
- Centres need to have the flexibility to develop diverse curricula that are responsive to the needs and aspirations of the young people who choose to go there.
- Flexible learning centres need to ensure that the education they provide enables young people to acquire new knowledge, skills and ways of seeing the world.

Pedagogy

The issue of teacher/student relationships and the teaching strategies that flowed from that was a dominant theme within the data from our study.

Students frequently used adjectives such as ‘caring, small, community, family, respectful, equal, supportive, non-judgemental, mutual responsibility’ when discussing their flexi school/centre. The relationships that were part of the broader environment in the school/centre were also reflected in the teaching/learning relationship within the various curricula offered at the sites. These relationships were identified by young people and workers alike as being central to the young people’s on-going engagement in the learning processes at the sites. The positive focus of schools was also important, both in terms of young people feeling ‘celebrated’ (not just accepted), and being able to learn in a positive environment. Teachers gave them sufficient time and assistance to complete their work. Many students also commented on the effectiveness of teaching strategies that they described as ‘real life’, ‘hands on’, ‘connected’ and ‘conversational’. However, levels of intellectual engagement with the work varied across the sites.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Further research needs to be funded that investigates the impact of school culture and relationships between staff and students on student engagement in schooling processes.
- The delivery of curriculum within these sites should continue to be connected to the young people’s worlds, to support students in their learning and to value the diversity of the student population, but must also be concerned with learning that is intellectually challenging.

Post-schooling pathways

While the backgrounds of the students were diverse, common elements included resolute life ambitions and a strong work ethic. Many of the students also put a great deal of effort into attending their flexi school – some juggled work and/or caring responsibilities while others travelled significant distances to maintain their connection to learning. Young people frequently commented upon their renewed enthusiasm for learning as a result of attending the alternative school. However, there was not always a clear pathway to continued learning; for example, some centres did not have offerings beyond Year 10.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Equity offices in universities and TAFE need to work with these sites to support entry into higher education for those young people seeking such pathways.
- A longitudinal research study needs to be funded that explores the destinations of young people attending these centres.
- Whilst flexible learning centres may provide very

specific curricula offerings (e.g. literacy and numeracy or TAFE certificates), students would benefit from pathways among them that would enable a continuation of their education in flexible mode.

Staffing

Staff demonstrated a significant commitment to young people and to the differences that they believed they and the schools were making to the lives of the students. However, staff often worked within difficult conditions, had varying levels of job security, and salary structures. These conditions are likely to impact upon the long term viability of workers’ engagement in the sites. In some cases the staff indicated that they felt that their work was devalued.

RECOMMENDATION

- Working conditions, professional support and development, salary structures and security of employment for workers in these sites need to be the focus of a major study of the sector in order to develop strategies for attracting and retaining high quality staff.

Funding

Many alternative schools have been dependent upon funding arrangements that are at times ad hoc and uncertain. Staff at some of the flexible learning centres also raised issues in respect to whether or not they were defined as a ‘school’. These both had implications for resources and personnel. Current models of funding do not seem to align with the flexible ethos of alternative schooling sites and the specific needs of their students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Funding based on student enrolments should not be restricted to census date figures.
- Funding needs to be concerned with long term planning rather than be determined on a yearly basis, especially in relation to the employment of staff.
- Funding of alternative schools and the students who attend them should take into account flexibility of attendance.
- Funding of alternative education sites needs to recognise the importance of employing a diversity of workers in health, welfare and education, and to treat these workers as equal partners in the delivery of a full-service education.
- The definition of what constitutes a ‘school’ needs further research and discussion, especially in terms of the possible negative impacts of such definitions upon curricula funding and resourcing.

Key findings and recommendations (cont.)

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Post-schooling pathways

Staffing

Funding

INTRODUCTION

Many countries have identified the importance of increasing school retention levels to improve the economy and to address social inclusion agendas. No Child Left Behind in the US and Every Child Matters in the UK have been two policy responses to these concerns (see Garan, 2004; Fullick & Brighouse, 2007). In Australia, the Federal Government, in conjunction with the States, has similarly identified improving school retention as a national priority through its learning or earning agenda. The intention of this agenda is to reach 90% Year 12 attainment by 2015 (DEEWR, 2009). The current year 12 attainment rate in Australia is 74% (Australian Govt. FactSheet, 2009).

In order to meet this target, a raft of measures has been put in place to ensure that young people up to the age of 24 are either in the workforce or in an education centre. Whilst these measures include incentives for young people to enter the workforce or to engage in education and training, there are many punitive practices likely to make life difficult for young people and their parents/guardians, many of whom are already experiencing financial hardships. Policies include withholding social security payments from parents of young people, and independent young people, who are deemed to be not 'earning or learning'. In Queensland the Federal Government initiative referred to as the School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM) is currently being trialled in Logan City as well as Doornadgee in the State's North. Other measures include requiring young people who receive youth allowance to develop a training or job search plan, to sign a written agreement about their plan and to meet regularly with a job service provider to monitor their progress. Young people who fail to attend meetings may be penalised and have their payments stopped or suspended.

However, some incentives have been implemented in order to encourage young people who have left school, or are contemplating leaving school, to attend other education or training sites. The Commonwealth and Queensland Governments have agreed, under National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions to implement an Education or Training Entitlement (COAG meeting outcomes, 2009). The agreement states that the Commonwealth and State Governments have agreed to 'deliver an education or training entitlement for young people 15-24' (Australian Govt. FactSheet, 2009). Under the agreement 15-19 year olds will have an 'entitlement' to a training place to gain a government-subsidised qualification. Young people aged between 20-24 years will be 'entitled' to a training place, so long as the course they undertake will lead to gaining a higher qualification than they currently have. For both age groups, the 'entitlement' is subject to admission requirements and course availability. At this stage the 'entitlement' is being offered until 31 December 2011, at which point it will be reviewed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). However, how young people will meet the costs of further education is not always clear.

Unfortunately this policy terrain does not take into account the complex sets of circumstances that often cause young people to reject mainstream schooling. Many young people have rejected education because of their life circumstances and because of their often negative experiences of mainstream schooling. Working to retain greater numbers of young people in education will necessitate education centres being cognisant of the needs of their students and of creating an inclusive learning environment. Similarly it will require mainstream schools learning from those sites which have managed to (re)engage young people who have been marginalised within schools. In Queensland there are a number of alternative centres or schools that work with early school leavers.

These schools² are of varying types. This report is concerned with those 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 behaviour management centres set up to cater to young people suspended and

2. Within the research conducted for this report some of the sites wanted to be recognised as schools whilst others were adamant they were not a school.



expelled from their former schools and that have as their purpose 'disciplining' the young person into being a 'normal' student. The focus of this research was thus on schools that are not so much concerned with changing the student, but instead focus on providing learning programs, a supportive environment and teaching and learning strategies that engage young people. YANQ, the peak body for youth organisations in Queensland is aware of the positive work that occurs in such schools in terms of providing young people with the educational experiences and emotional support that they have been unable to access in mainstream education. In conjunction with researchers from three Queensland universities and representatives of various educational and community service sectors, YANQ was interested in determining the extent to which these alternative schools are able to reengage young people in meaningful learning.

Alternative schools play an important role in the catering to the educational needs, academic and social, of young people disengaged from mainstream schooling sectors (te Riele, 2007). However, as other research has indicated (Kim & Taylor, 2008), some alternative schools provide a warm and caring environment, but fail to break the cycle of reproduction of academic disadvantage. The YANQ project will benefit alternative

schools by providing feedback as to the kind of practices that such schools need to engage in, in order to break this cycle. Further, it will also have benefit in that it will be informative to mainstream schooling in terms of how to re-engage those students who are currently marginalised within schooling processes. Additional benefits will arise from the close relationship that the researchers have with YANQ in terms of informing youth work professionals about engaged young people.

In undertaking this research, we have been concerned with what makes a successful alternative school, taking into account issues of pedagogy, curriculum, relationships between staff and young people, and material resources available to the school. Aligned with the notion of success, is the issue of sustainability. Many of these schools have experienced uncertainties and difficulties around funding which has made long term planning problematic in terms of resources and personnel. In order to obtain required levels of support for alternative schools, this project aimed to develop understandings of why it is that some young people disengage from, then leave mainstream schools and later turn to the services of alternative educational providers.

Introduction (cont.)



FACTORS INFLUENCING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

Early school leaving may be the result of highly individualised circumstances, but research indicates that it is usually the consequence of a complex mix of factors (Taylor, 2009; Mosen-Lowe, Vidovich and Chapman, 2009; Savelsberg and Martin-Giles, 2008; White and Wyn, 2008; te Riele, 2006; Smyth, 2004, Smyth and Hattam, 2005). Key influences are social and economic factors (such as socio-economic status; family relationships; gender; language and cultural barriers; Indigenous background; poor achievement; the desire/pressure to earn money), and a host of school related issues (such as school policies, pedagogical practices and teacher/student relationships).

Social and economic factors

The current overall Year 12 attainment rate in Australia is 74% (Australian Govt. FactSheet, 2009). A large proportion of the 26% of students who do not 'make it' are identified as low academic achievers, boys, and Indigenous (Taylor, 2009). However, such categories are misleading. The dimensions of social exclusion comprise a complex web of interdependent features often founded upon the most fundamental of all: poverty. As indicated by the Deputy Prime Minister, currently only 59% of students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds in Australia finish Year 12 (Gillard, 2009). Research consistently supports the link between non-completion and low SES (White & Wyn,

2008; Savelsberg & Martin-Giles, 2008; Ross & Gray, 2005; Lamb, Walstab, Teese et al, 2004). Moreover, data provided by the Organisation of Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD) indicate that the relationship between socio-economic background and educational outcomes is stronger in Australia than in many other comparable countries (OECD, 2007). Within the low SES segment of the population, Indigenous students struggle with the multiple challenges posed by geolocation, colonization, generational marginalization and cultural and language barriers ('Closing the gap', 2009). Many of these issues are shared by refugee and newly arrived immigrant youth. For marginalized young males within all these social categories, the risk of dropping out of school is even greater (Lingard, Martino & Mills, 2009). However, whilst it is true that, on the whole, completion rates are generally higher for females, research shows that gender continues to be a factor for vulnerable young women from low SES, particularly when coupled with teenage pregnancy (Connell, 2009).

Families in economic difficulty may also have higher levels of residential and school mobility that impact upon the ability of students to maintain continuity in their academic studies and establish strong networks of support amongst peers. Combined with increased responsibilities in respect to siblings and early job seeking, such contexts increase the risk of non-completion of schooling (Gray & Beresford, 2002; White & Wyn, 2008). Many researchers identify a range of socio-cultural disadvantages experienced by some young people right from their first year (Bernstein, 1977;

Teese & Polesel, 2003). A lack of expertise in a whole range of taken-for-granted middle class socio-cultural situations, identified as 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1984; Smyth, 2004) in the research literature, creates an achievement gap that widens over time unless there is sensitive and sustained intervention by the school (Apple & Buras, 2006). If this gap remains and grows the consequences include low achievement, low self esteem and eventually disengagement from learning (Teese & Polesel, 2003) often provoking resistant behaviours in the classroom and school. These challenging behaviours set such students up for cycles of conflict with schooling authorities leading to absenteeism, suspension, expulsion or 'dropping out'.

A generation ago, many young people, particularly from low-SES backgrounds, routinely left school early to seek employment, however, rapid socio-cultural change and global economic restructurings have made this pathway less viable and fraught with individualized 'risks'. Contemporary sociological research suggests that society is now characterized by new, unequally distributed, risks and challenges that require individual responses:

Like wealth, risks adhere to the class pattern, only inversely: wealth accumulates at the top, risks at the bottom. To that extent, risks seem to strengthen, not abolish, the class society. Poverty attracts an unfortunate abundance of risks. By contrast, the wealthy (in income, power or education) can purchase safety and freedom from risk. (Beck, 1992, p. 35).

For those young people who are most vulnerable to non-completion, this wider social context adds to their dilemmas. In an era of neoliberal national educational competitiveness (Apple, 2006; Ball, 2006) they become 'the problem' for failing to negotiate the hazards of this so-called 'risk society' that demands increasing levels of social, emotional and educational capital to succeed. Schools are positioned to play a vital role in helping such students to develop such competencies, but there must be greater attention paid to the broader socio-economic context and its inherent inequalities. In recent years, government discourse has re-cast the terminology of this problem. Social justice has been replaced by equity. Equality of opportunity has overtaken notions of affirmative action with deficit labels attached to those young people who 'fail' to seize it. An 'equitable' approach ignores the social reality that children start school from very unequal positions and thus perpetuates class based inequality. According to Taylor & Singh (2005):

(While)... shifts in language are not in themselves enough to effect more fundamental changes in approach which are necessary in implementing major educational reforms... they may easily result in... issues slipping off agendas... (and)... the particular

needs of these groups... (being)... glossed over, and economic and cultural differences become recontextualised as individual differences (p. 11).

Once they enrol, some young people may struggle to connect with the culture of the school. Their unique background combinations of gendered influences, family practices and support systems, language development, emotional and social capital and class positioning all contribute to the shaping of a young person's attitude towards schooling. Empathy and support systems from the school are therefore vitally necessary to the academic success and social well-being of many students. The next section looks more closely at the systemic and school based issues that may contribute to early school leaving.

Schooling factors

School cultures are connected to processes of departmental policy and accountability that impact on teachers' options in terms of behaviour management and negotiations with students. As young people move through primary into secondary schooling, and in particular into the senior phase, the rules pertaining to curriculum content and assessment become increasingly inflexible. Credentialing and rank-ordering of students demand regimes of comparability and uniformity of assessment that takes little account of the life circumstances of marginalised youth. Whilst there are opportunities for students to apply for 'special consideration', the reasons are usually limited to fairly specific emergent medical and family circumstances that do not take into account the accumulative nature of the debilitating effects of poverty, family break-down or conflict and the general uncertainty of life circumstances that may arise from these and other factors of social marginalization. Additionally, marginalised students may not have the confidence and/or skills to use systemic avenues of appeal particularly if they have a history of conflict with school authorities. The 'system' presents itself as an unfriendly maze of rules and paperwork that is overwhelming to students who are often already disengaged and/or alienated from schooling processes.

Rules that apply to uniforms, self-presentation, social interactions and assumptions of unquestioning obedience to adult power position certain students for on-going systemic conflict. The young people who live in unstable and/or unsupportive/neglectful environments will find it difficult to comply with many of the cultural expectations of mainstream, middle class schools. Others may struggle with school rules for a variety of reasons that range from behaviours associated from special needs to sophisticated personal philosophies of individual freedom (McGregor, 2009). However, regardless of the reasons, young people who are suspended or excluded from school

Factors influencing early school leaving (cont.)

Social and economic factors

Schooling factors

Factors influencing early school leaving (cont.)

Schooling factors

due to behavioural issues 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. Teachers provide a bridge between young people and education systems. Classrooms are the educational interface at which connection or disconnection occurs for students. Thus, the relationships and pedagogical practices within these spaces are fundamental to engaging and retaining the interest and trust of students (Smyth & Hattam, 2005; McFadden & Munns, 2002).

School failure is often attributed to a failure within the individual child (Ball, 2004). Founded on notions of developmental psychology, deficit models of youth frame many responses to non-completion of schooling. In an age of increasing individualisation of risk, the response has been to situate the blame within the student. Quinn, Poirier et al. (2006) argue strongly against this notion:

When a child fails to learn and grow, the fault lies not solely with the child but instead lies mainly with the system and the adults responsible for it (p. 11)

Te Riele (2007) also makes the point that rather than targeting so called 'at risk' youth – schools need to change from a focus on uniformity to a focus on diversity.

However, official terms such as 'at-risk' and 'disengaged' youth often individualize the problem, drawing attention away from the contextual issues of teacher-student relationships, curriculum content and teaching strategies. Classrooms continue to be formal, hierarchical and structured around the accepted power of the teacher to control the content, pace and direction of lessons (McFadden & Munns, 2002). Whilst most students will endure, though not necessarily enjoy, this situation, for students whose lives have little resonance with the explicit and 'hidden' curriculum of their classroom and who lack the cultural capital necessary to succeed at school, disengagement and disaffection with learning are likely, and often understandable, consequences. Gable, Bullock & Evans (2006) identify a mis-match between the structure of schools and marginalised segments of the population and a failure on the part of schools to address diversity and 'school readiness gap'. The lack of space for students to insert their own experiences alienates them from the shared culture of the classroom. Traditional teaching practices often fail to take into account what students bring to the pedagogical relationship and reasons why they might comply with or resist school practices. Subsequent power struggles between such students and their teachers frequently lead to increasing levels of coercion and punishments (Gable, Bullock & Evans 2006) that erode positive elements of teaching and learning.

Additionally, within all relationships, emotional issues must be considered. Schools are often the sites where students give vent to emotions generated elsewhere, for example, at home and among peers (McFadden & Munns, 2002). A recent investigation into schooling responses to youth crime (Reid, 2009) highlights the importance of the role played by teachers in investing emotional capital in their students. Earlier research confirms this perspective, situating emotional capital at the very heart of education. According to Harding & Pribram (2004), 'emotions... (have a place)... in the production of knowledge, culture, individual and collective identities, and power relations' (p. 864). The emotions experienced by students such as despair, resentment and low self-esteem lead to early school leaving, and, according to Gable, Bullock & Evans (2006), 60% of early leavers suffer various emotional problems. On the other hand, the emotions expressed by school authorities often demonstrate a desire to simply rid themselves of the problem. Schools often want such students out as illustrated in this comment by a school principal interviewed by Skiba & Peterson (2000):

You don't get it... we don't want to understand these kids; we want to get them out (p. 340).

Whilst such a comment is not representative of all principals in all schools, it points to the complexity and emotionally charged nature of the problem (see also Morrison & Skiba, 2001). Approaches that attempt to 'fix' the student in isolation from such contextual influences will continue to falter because they look at only one half of the problem. Reid (2009) suggests that schools can do much more to harness emotion as 'a socio-cultural product rather than something that resides in the individual psychological make-up of a student' (p. 2). Reid further argues that a lack of hope can lead to disengagement and cites instances of teachers 'investing emotional capital... (of engaging) in a form of emotional labour that attempts to induce appropriate behaviour through investing more emotion in a relationship developed through trust' (p.11). She concludes with a call for schools to facilitate 'networks of trust'.

In summary, it is possible to identify a number of themes from the literature about early school leaving and the role played by mainstream educational sites and providers. Whilst they cannot fix the broader socio-economic and cultural influences on the lives of their students, they are positioned to shape learning: learning environments; learning programs and the learning that comes from effective teaching. The recent research conducted on behalf of YANQ into five diverse flexi schools/centres in South East Queensland, attests to the importance of these three factors (environment, programs and teaching) in retaining, engaging and motivating students who have 'dropped out' or who have been 'pushed out' of mainstream schools.



THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

In Queensland, for students who leave school early or are seeking to return to education there are a variety of options open to them. In the Queensland study presented here five different sites were visited to explore some of these options for young people in the South East corner of the State. These sites included: a high school auspiced by a church that catered for girls who were experiencing serious family and other personal problems (Fernvale Education Centre); a regional flexible high school overseen by a local mainstream high school and supported by community organisations (Woodlands Flexi School); a very small lower secondary high school located under an urban house with one teacher and a social worker, catering for young people up to the age of 16, and funded from small pockets of money from a variety of local high schools (Cave Street Flexi School); an inner city senior high school for young people aged 15 to 25 years, co-aided by a church and a Local Government (Victoria Meadows Flexi School); and a learning centre that was primarily concerned with providing students with work experience, mainly in relation to motor mechanics, and funded through a large community organisation (The Garage). See Appendix 1 for further details on each of the five research sites.

Visits were conducted at each site according to when the schools could accommodate us. The length of such visits varied between one and five days. Given the relatively small size of the schools and the intimate nature of some of the classes, we were mindful not to intrude upon the work that was being carried out. We conducted interviews with a range of students at each

site. These were carried out individually or within the context of focus groups, depending upon the personal preferences of the young people involved. Adult personnel available to be interviewed depended upon the nature of the site and included teachers, workers, parents, volunteers, administrators and social workers. Throughout the report pseudonyms are used for all of the sites and people interviewed.

It became apparent from the interviews with the young people and the adults that knowledge of these sites and other learning centres, programs, schooling options, learning opportunities and pathways do not appear to be widely known by educational authorities and other organisations serving young people in Queensland. This is not peculiar to Queensland. Thomson and Russell (2009) in a study of such services in the Midlands in the UK, found that the provision of services for students who had been excluded from school was *ad hoc*, there were a variety of funding mechanisms and a lack of coordination between schools and these services. What became apparent from our interviews with young people using the services in Queensland, as with those in Thomson and Russell's (2009) study, was that word of mouth, being in the right place at the right time and other forms of chance encounters were key factors in their knowledge about the existence of, and subsequent decisions to enrol in one of the education service providers visited in this study. Addressing this lack of knowledge of such services is one of the underpinning purposes of this report.

In NSW Kitty te Riele (2007) mapped the alternative

The Research Findings (cont.)

Resourcing of the sites

education landscape in that State through web searches, public documents and brochures. In NSW, as in Queensland, te Riele noted that there was 'a bewildering array of projects' (pg. 54) available to young people. In undertaking a mapping of these services she identified the ways in which these sites were located across two dimensions. On the first dimension alternative education projects were mapped according to which they either saw the young person as being 'at risk' and thus needing to be changed to meet the expectations of traditional schooling or to the extent to which they recognized that the learning environment needed to be changed to meet the needs of the young people attending the project. The other dimension concerned the sustainability of the project in terms of its security of funding, staffing and facilities.

The concern of this report is with those services which do not have as their *raison d'être* fixing up young people so that they can return to mainstream schooling. The sites which are the focus of this report are those that seek to provide the young people accessing their services with a personally meaningful education. In some cases these sites provide what has come to be known as 'second chance education' (see for example, Ross & Gray, 2005), or in the case of some of the young people we met – third, fourth, fifth, sixth and so on chance education. In terms of sustainability, staff within these sites had varying levels of job security, funding arrangements were similarly ranged in their security and the levels of commitment from their major sponsors were diverse.

In the sections that follow we investigate the resourcing and staffing of these sites and identify the types of young people who attend them along with their reasons for choosing flexible alternatives to mainstream education. What has been significant in the sites we visited is that many of the young people who had rejected mainstream schooling were highly engaged with the learning opportunities provided to them at these sites. This engagement can, we would suggest, be attributed to a combination of factors related to the curricula offered, pedagogical practices employed, staff relationships with young people and the philosophies underpinning the centre's organisation. The data from the participants in the research at these sites raise a number of issues in relation to improving the quality and security of education provision for young people attending such sites. Data used in the following pages have been selected in terms of the best available examples for particular issues and are not intended as complete representations of the individual schools.

Resourcing of the sites

The sustainability of alternative schools is a significant issue. The levels of funding of the programs, resources and personnel has a clear impact upon the quality of the programs, levels of security and well-being of staff and the physical environment. In many instances the schools we visited had to scramble around in search of various funds, in some cases there was a feeling that they were not getting what was rightfully theirs. For instance, in one site there was a claim that the way Federal money is distributed to the States did not ensure proper distribution to flexi schools. The Assistant Principal at one site made the following comments in relation to State distribution of funding:

Melinda (Fernvale Education Centre):

We've had huge, huge blues and to the point where (the principal) and I both said, 'Look, it's almost like they're holding their own purse' but really it's Federal funding's purse and I said, 'Why don't we just say to Canberra, 'excuse me are these people in fact allowed to do this' and whose purse are they holding and what's the problem?'

Compounding the issue at this school was that it should be able to attract special funding to support the particular needs of many of their students. However, the procedures to obtain this funding support are often so time consuming that putting the effort in to obtain the money almost costs more than the return. According to Assistant Principal, Melinda:

The registrar has been driven insane with processes and honestly she's employed for hours upon hours and plus her extra time that she does gratis to get one girl ascertained socially-emotionally in that category and so when you weighed it up and how much they give you per job you're going 'hang on a minute this can't be right'.

In terms of receiving eligible funding for the students, one issue identified at a number of the sites related to the census date for funding for enrolled students. It was noted by a number of workers that many mainstream schools appear to hold onto their so-called 'difficult' students until after the census date and then they encourage the students to leave. Many of these students then end up at these alternative educational sites. In the majority of instances, the organisation wore the cost of supporting the young person's education. As a consequence, many of the sites we visited could not exist without the benefit of an external benefactor such as the church, community organisation or indeed the goodwill of volunteers. This was indicated, for example by Peter, the manager of The Garage:

The Research Findings (cont.)

Resourcing of the sites

The current program has barriers to people reengaging. There is a desperate need for funding for a program that needs to engage and maintain that engagement of young people who cannot make it anywhere else, and there needs to be that sort of ongoing funding. I can never understand why in schools, funding is not attached to the child instead of going to the school. At census day they say I've got five hundred kids, they get paid for five hundred kids. In August when it comes up for Government they still get paid on the original census... I think they all might do it. There's a big rush to get their numbers up before census day to get the enrolments and when enrolments are finished, the difficult kids are shoved off without money and unfortunately a lot of them come here. And we don't have the money to support them because they're not eligible for our programs because those programs have specific guidelines. So the [community organisation] takes them in and we try and do our best but its funding. This place cost in this financial year just over a million dollars to operate and we get this year probably a total of three hundred and fifty thousand dollars in funding so the remainder is [from the community organisation]. And I'll think you'll be pushing hard to find any organisation anywhere that funds more than three quarters of their program.

The lack of, and security of, funding had a significant impact upon the programs at these sites. When asked about his greatest challenge at the site, Kevin, the curriculum Coordinator at The Garage responded:

Working on a shoestring budget's probably the biggest challenge that we have, and a lack of staff, but again that comes back to budget and I guess a lot of these kids kind of say this has been a great thing to come on because it's better than school, but it's not perfect for them. They end up doing more with vehicles because we're good at that but realistically they don't want to be mechanics. So it would be nice if we could get more programs.

When asked later about the kinds of support needed for places like The Garage Kevin stated:

I will say it again, more funding, but at the same time, I guess just more acknowledgement from Government that there is such an issue with a lot of kids and especially nowadays with a lot of younger kids. Yeah, we all know there are fifteen year olds that are roaming the streets but around here they're not, they're thirteen and twelve. We can't take anybody younger than twelve but every now and again we get twelve year olds that pop up that want to come... So maybe that acknowledgement from the Government that it isn't the fifteen year olds that are roaming the streets it's younger than that...

Here he picked up on an issue that confronted a number of the sites; that is, that sites were often not being funded for all the participants. In this instance it was underage students, who if not at this program would be on the streets. There was also a lack of job security for many of the workers in these projects as a result of doubts about ongoing funding. As a teacher, Juliet, from Cave Street Flexi School observed:

...neither the teaching position nor the youth worker position in this program is permanent – temporary status and it's on a twelve month contract.

A similar sentiment was expressed by the social worker, Keira, from the same site:

At the moment I'm really happy with what we've got here. I guess the only downfall for that for me and also the teacher is that our positions aren't permanent, we're contracted and that depends on the Day Eight figures at the beginning of the year. ...we don't have the numbers most of the time to make up for what we need at the beginning of the year because schools don't refer at the end of the year because they want those numbers for the Day Eight figures.

The Research Findings (cont.)

Resourcing of the sites

Some of the sites had specific programs that were funded by an external body, for example one site offered a course that was funded by the Queensland Police Service. Another site indicated that they were only able to get their resources through the support of a local youth service. Even those sites that were closely linked to systemic schools had issues around funding.

Julia (Woodlands Flexi School): I'll tell you now, we're getting a lot of phone calls from districts about the program, what they want to know is: what types of curriculum we offer, what type of behaviour management we offer etc. etc. There is no model in Queensland on how to staff a flexi school, on how to fund it, on how to provide programs – what I believe [education authorities] need to look at a model - they have a model for an SEU unit, they have models for a primary school. A primary school for seventy students, gets way more money than we do and we have the same amount of students but we don't have any library. We rely on our main school which is fabulous, they are fabulous however I would like to say that alternate education is one pathway for students; it's not the fit for all; it is one pathway and this is how we would need to staff it for it to be successful. ...if it wasn't for the community and the council donating the building we couldn't run it. If it wasn't for people like Rotary who donate money. Carols by Candlelight occurs once a year in the park and our students go and sell the programs and the candles – we raise about four thousand dollars a year for that. Now that money we use to pay for students to go on two camps a year and those camps are just invaluable. A lot of kids have never been camping before, they've never been on holiday, they've never been out of Woodlands and it opens up their eyes and they've never really even had three healthy meals and sat at a table... Now that takes money and it's the community who pays for that.

For many of the staff working at these sites, the lack of funding was synonymous with a lack of regard for the work they were doing. There was a perception that these are marginalised students, provided with a marginalised education in a marginalised setting. However, these concerns were not reflected in the commitment of the staff to the young people.

Many of these centres were dependent on the local community for support. There were varying forms of recognition for each of these sites. One, for instance, had been visited by the Governor-General, had received various awards and had been featured positively on a television current affairs program. One teacher at one of the sites spoke of how the Mayor had visited the school and the positive impact of this on the students.

Rhys (Woodlands Flexi School): A beautiful thing happened here a few years back. Our Mayor,... used to come down here and say, 'This is where the future mayors of the town are, you are the people who have independence and the focus; you're not tied into being conformist, I suppose you're not just towing the line. You guys have thought about it all and you understand where you're coming from and you've got that independence which is gonna drive you to become a mayor – this is where they're coming from.' And that sort of language and discussion is fantastic and really gave us an identity which was positive.

This school was also provided with a community building for operating the school. However, not all of the sites received the same levels of recognition. It was claimed at one school that was linked to several high schools, that they were an often forgotten identity and were frequently left uninformed about various forms of professional development that was available to them. There also appeared to be little knowledge of some of the sites. Charles from The Garage told us how:

I used to sit out of the front of Centrelink and hand out brochures and talk to mums and dads there and whatever, 'Oh we didn't know that existed' and 'Oh, so you're the PCYC'. 'No we're the YMCA'. 'Oh, oh, so you've got a gym?', 'No, this is what we do.' 'Oh, oh, well my aunty's uncle's brother's got a son like that'. I said, 'Well, tell him to ring us'

In terms of resources, it is clear that flexi schools/ centres vary greatly. Of the five we visited, only two resembled mainstream schools. Of the remaining three, one was a workshop, one was situated in a community hall and the other constituted just one small open air area under a building belonging to a community youth centre. The area was so small that the twenty-one students who attended had to be divided into three groups and rotated. According to their social worker:

Keira (Cave Street Flexi School):

Even the taller kids hit their heads on the beams downstairs - they're actually even down one end of the classroom!

However, the students at this site, and the other centres in the study were not seeking physically lavish settings. They had all left larger, much better resourced and funded mainstream schools. They came because of the people and the way they related to them and taught them.

Background of staff

People have come to work in this educational sector through a variety of pathways. We came across a former detective, motor mechanics, engineers, TAFE teachers, regular teachers, social workers and youth workers. (Many of the sites were also supported by volunteer workers and organisations.) People had all sorts of varying qualifications, one worker (Ron) at The Garage, for instance, had a Bachelor of Applied Social Science in Counselling and Communication, an Advanced Diploma in Theology, a Certificate of Occupational Studies in Plumbing, Certificate III in Hospitality, Food and Beverage and voluntary experience in a counselling service for people with depression. Many of the workers had also had bad schooling and/or life experiences and were thus enthusiastic about supporting other young people facing similar challenges. For instance, Charles from The Garage described how he responded to the young people who asked what he would know about their lives:

I said, **'But I was one of you guys'...** I was homeless; I was a rat bag, got into a lot of trouble, grew up, came to live in Queensland with an older brother and met my wife. That's probably the easiest way to say it. I've told them that I was homeless, how I worked to support myself from fourteen and that. I don't know if they believe me but I can see what they're doing...

For a number of workers, engaging in alternative education was a political decision. Rhys from Woodlands Flexi School volunteered to take up the position based on his attraction to the politics found in the 70s' ideas of alternative education and commitment to democratic forms of schooling. Workers at Victoria Meadows Flexi School were driven by their commitment to developing community. The commitment of an Indigenous teacher, Penny, at Fernvale Education Centre was shaped by her experiences of, and desire to challenge racism:

The kids are saying; **'Well I don't fit in anywhere else, where can I go?'** As a Murri person... I hear the horror stories out there about kids going into classrooms... and I was one of those kids and I got told to get out of the classroom because they wanted to talk about Aboriginal people drinking on The Esplanade in Cairns, you know, and I can remember my teacher telling me to get out so I got out thinking, **'Oh this is good I get out of class'**. But then when I came back and my class mates were telling me, I was the only Black one in my class, and telling me the sorts of things that they were talking about in class, you know, the racist comments - I probably wasn't in a position

to be able to say anything at that stage. Even at university, when I was sitting in a big lecture theatre and I had one of my fellow students get up and say, **'Well if I had my way I would have shot a lot of the Black bastards years ago'** – they were her words not mine. And you know and it's scary to think that this person's going to go out there to be a teacher.

Thus the philosophies apparent at the sites and articulated by the workers in them have meant that the sites did not just cater to the educational needs of young people. The sites also often offered counselling, assistance with finding accommodation, financial resources, child care and personal advocacy. For instance, Peter, the manager of The Garage, provided an example of the kinds of support they offered:

We had another situation with a young fellow. I went along to his juvenile justice stuff. He was an absolute terror at school. The school excluded him and other schools excluded him as well. He was here for quite some time, still gets into a little bit of trouble; he's still here actually on a part-time basis, but he went to this juvenile justice conference to answer the allegations from the school and so forth. I went along with him as his support. He sat there, he listened to the allegations – some of the allegations were making me sort of get nervous and squirmy in the chair – then when it came time, he never said anything. He didn't deny, he didn't lose his cool he just sat there. When it came around he said, **'Look it's all true, I'm very sorry, it's all true. I'm really trying hard to change.'** They congratulated him. They said, **'Look, his personality, his demeanour has changed so much.'** So I said, **'Well does this mean he can come back to school and do his Grade Ten?'** The answer was, **'No, we don't want him at school.'** So what do you do with a kid like that? So he's doing Grade Ten with us.

This example, not only indicates the kinds of advocacy performed by many of these sites, but also of the frustrations many of the workers felt about how unfairly young people can be treated and is an indicator of the safety net that these sites provide to young people who are denied access to mainstream education. Reflective of the philosophy of The Garage as well as the other sites visited, one of the workers commented, **'We catch the kids that have fallen through the fingers of society.'**

However, despite the stresses that go with working at these sites it was not uncommon to find workers emphasizing how much they enjoyed working with the young people. Charles, a former motor mechanic stated that: **'I love what I do. This is probably the most satisfying job... the most stressful'**. Brad, also from The Garage, stated:

The Research Findings (cont.)

Background of staff

The Research Findings (cont.)

Background of staff

I like it when the kids are having fun. When you see the kids learn something new and feel a bit excited. ...kids feel proud about themselves when you teach them something and they feel really good. You give them some tools... and they do it and they feel really good about themselves... So you feel like a bit of a proud dad sometimes and I do actually say to some of the kids, **'Make me proud, show enthusiasm, don't be dawdling, if you run out of work go and ask the boss'** - it is rewarding. I suppose the big thing will be seeing how they go out there in real life getting the jobs and maturing... you have to adjust your approaches a little bit because some of these kids have a life that would just make you cry - it's really sad. You've got to know a little bit about the people and know how to deal with them there but once again it's a bit of an art and these kids aren't like (regular) school kids

Another teacher, James, from Woodlands Flexi School stated:

It's a great challenge. Every day is so different. I go home every night and my wife says, 'how did you go' (laughs). Where do I start? Every day is completely different, it's very interesting work and the kids are great really.

However, several workers commented that it was the conditions, not the young people that made the job less attractive for them. For instance, one of the workers who had told us how much he enjoyed the job stated:

Look, the only thing that... is a stickler with me is money. If someone offered me more money I'm afraid I'd go... Put it this way, I earn under fifty thousand a year. I can walk out of here and... get eighty thousand a year, and that's the sticking point at the moment because money's tight.

One of the teachers who worked in the centre located under a house Juliet, (Cave Street Flexi School), when talking about the working environment stated: 'I mean it wouldn't pass an occupational health and safety down there'. She went on to say that:

...it does get hot in summer - we have pedestal fans here. We have to buy a heater for winter. We've only recently had the café blinds put up; prior to that when I first started, that was completely open... (cold) August winds (with a) concrete floor except (for) that mat under the table.

When asked if she thought other teachers would have to put up with these conditions she replied:

No, and I would never have either. I would never had done it, it's only because I've become attached

to these young people that I haven't bothered to pursue the mainstream.

This attachment to young people and to the sense of difference that the workers believed they and the schools were making to young people were evident in the numerous anecdotes that were provided to us from all of the different centres. For instance, Charles (The Garage) told the following story:

... one of our young fellows, when he started January, we all wanted him to go and now he's a (turned lad). So the progression is huge from him - disengaged from school, in trouble, now he leads the other by example... I think he's found out we're not going to run away and also that we, by proxy, put pressure on him to take responsibility. 'Here's your job, do it. If you don't want to do it you don't have to be here. There's your choices.' And he sort of went, 'Oh, OK'.

And, social worker, Angela from Victoria Meadows Flexi School provided this anecdote:

... one kid that I think of who, yeah didn't do much work for the first couple of years sort of started to do some work towards the end - you know, had this idea that Grade Twelve, you just hand in the last semester's work and then you've done Grade Twelve? I mean you try and explain that it doesn't work that way. But then, he had this passion for music, music technology, which he discovered... along the way so he wasn't one of the first kids to do the program, the program had been running for a while, but he started to get into to it and now, he actually auditioned and got into a TAFE course. His mum even wrote us a letter to say 'thanks so much' because she was at her wits end as well in terms of going, 'I don't know what's gonna happen with this person, I don't know if anything's happening here that's going to be useful' and you know we probably had doubts thinking - 'is this the right place for him, are we doing the right thing?' But we hung in there. And there's been enough of those to start to realise that you can't know what the path is going to be, but often if you do have a good relationship with them and support them and believe in them, they start to believe in themselves then they end up doing things.

However, this does not mean that there are not issues in terms of retaining staff. When asked about staff turnover at The Garage, the manager, Peter, stated:

Well we do. As I say it takes a very special person I think to be able to cope with the high levels of stress that can be placed upon them especially over a period of time. So finding that right personality is most difficult but the staff here I think, do a good job.



THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Who goes to flexible learning schools/centres?

Data from the study show a diversity of student population in terms of their personal circumstances and reasons for attending flexi schools/centres. Evidence from our investigations clearly supports the research that points to broader socio-economic factors. Responding to a question about student disengagement, one social worker commented on this:

Keira (Cave Street Flexi School): I think, you know, in the low socio-economic areas they sort of fall behind. They may not be able to pay fees and stuff like that and that casts them as an outcast... there may be things going on at home that others families aren't having and maybe schools aren't equipped to deal with that. And obviously they just fall through the cracks when they are in class and fall behind academically...

A worker from another centre made the following observation:

Angela (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): We've got a couple of kids who have, like, very tentative housing arrangements - one kid that lost his house a few weeks ago was in a share house situation and then that fell apart then... he would have been homeless for a little bit and now he's

kind of organised a meeting with someone's family. And another girl she was homeless for quite a while but now she's living with her boyfriend's mum and her boyfriend.

As argued in much of the literature about this topic, some students struggle with the rules common to most mainstream schools pertaining to uniforms, smoking and swearing. According to these three students:

Molly (Victoria Meadows Flexi School):

Yeah, I didn't like the uniforms and stuff, definitely, because I'm more of a free spiritual person - like, today I'm wearing this - I mean tomorrow I'll be wearing something completely different! Like I'll be wearing, I don't know, colours and stuff like I'm not really into having a set way of looking and being because I don't believe that a school should teach you how to look or how to be - they're just there to teach you how to do Maths, English and the subjects you need in order to make it - the rest of it is your choice in life.

Len (The Garage): I've never liked uniforms, I completely hate uniforms. I didn't like the teachers there... and they just never gave me the freedom to smoke...

And how is that different to here?

Len: You don't have to wear a uniform here, you can wear whatever you like (and) you're allowed

The Research Findings (cont.)

Who goes to flexible learning schools/centres?

to smoke ... They just really treat you more like an adult so it's more like a workplace than a school.

Our aim is not to criticize schools for the existence of such rules but merely to highlight their connections to the disengagement of some students and early school leaving. Perhaps it is not the actual rules that are problematic but the ways in which they are enforced. All of the flexi schools/centres we visited had rules but they were applied within a context of dialogue with students and once students understood the necessity of the rules they seemed to willingly comply as demonstrated by these two student responses to questions about discipline in their flexi schools/centres:

What did you think of this morning and the no phone rule? If you get caught using a phone in class you are asked to leave and come back the next day to talk about it?

Tom (Woodlands Flexi School): I reckon its pretty cool anyway 'cause at other schools if, like, your phone's out they just take it off you straightaway and... your parents have to come and get it then...

How does it (discipline) compare to mainstream schools?

Elizabeth (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): There's too much discipline at normal schools because, here, we don't get suspended, we don't get expelled or anything. If something happens, if we get in a conflict or something like that we get asked to leave and come back in a few days and then we have a meeting...

To get it sorted out?

Elizabeth: Yeah. Yeah that's how we solve conflict and it's very helpful that way so we don't feel like we're pushed out away from everyone ...

Our research shows that these students often have clear goals of what they want to achieve. In our interviews they talked keenly about their interests and possible careers:

What do you want to do when you finish?

Robert (Woodlands Flexi School): I want to go ahead with my music career and hopefully that will get me somewhere and I'm going to be starting up a boilermaker apprenticeship pretty soon.

What are your plans for when you finish school?

Sharon (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): I actually graduated flexi school in two thousand and seven and I got my other senior certificate and I did well with English and I did well with Music

and it was all really great and I enrolled into a TAFE course, Diploma of Music Performance, but again I had a lot of anxiety and I couldn't really stand up to that much... I'd turn up every day for that and it was really fast paced and I kind of wasn't used to that since high school and I kind of then put myself out of whack again. So I came back here, like I left that and just deferred it and I'll just need to apply again and audition again if I want to get into it.

So you're really trying to get some breaks?

Sharon: Yeah so that's kind of what my goal is now is just to record as much as I can to get onto radio and then maybe do some gigs and keep rehearsing...

Our data show that some students were returning to education after a long absence. Many preferred the smaller schools/classes offered by flexi schools/centres and most did not like some aspect of their previous school. The age range of students the students sampled is quite broad – ranging from early teens through to early 20s with varying levels of support. It is also common for early school leavers to have experienced considerable family mobility, a factor that contributes to the social, emotional and academic disengagement from school. According to three young interviewees:

Glen (The Garage): Well I've been to nine different schools so yeah...

Elizabeth (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): I think I've been to eleven primary schools and by the time I was in Year Seven I went to three different schools in the (same) year.

Along with such instability, a number of young people find that due to family circumstances they have to begin work at an early age and this inevitably impacts upon their schooling. The following student found himself alone and trying to balance school attendance requirements as well as working to survive without family support:

Malcolm (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): I left school about three months before I finished Year Twelve. I got expelled because I had a pretty big personal conflict with my old school principal. Pretty much he told me that I was useless ... I was working and he was like, 'you're not attending school' and I was working my arse off. I didn't have no parents supporting me because my parents are deceased and he didn't want to believe that they were deceased. I pretty much had to take in their death certificates to school to prove to him that they weren't alive... He would just pretty much, like I was just a dropkick of the community because I had no parents..

Students who attend such schools/centres might be parents or they might be homeless or in a constant of relocation:

Tom (Woodlands Flexi School): Yeah I moved out about two months ago or something for about a month and then I moved back and I'm back with my mum now....

We found one young man who was coping with fatherhood with the help of his family:

Patrick (The Garage): Oh yeah my son lives with me, me and the mother are still together but she works in Cairns – she lives up in Cairns, she doesn't like Brizzy.

For girls, however, becoming pregnant whilst still at school is still a major obstacle to continuing their education:

Claire (Fernvale Education Centre): I was pregnant and wasn't allowed to return to (my school) because I was going into Grade Twelve and they said that I'd start a fad for the younger children to all come to school pregnant!... They wouldn't take my re-enrolment for the Grade Twelve because I was pregnant. So my counsellor at the time or my youth worker she sourced a couple of places and came up with Fernvale as being the closest and easiest accessible for me. I was here for five or six months but then stopped to have my daughter and I eventually came back at the end of last year... They have a good crèche program... for young mums who want to come back and study they can just drop their children off at the crèche and still go to school, sort of like normal, but they don't really have to pay a high price for childcare and stuff...

Since coming here what do you like most about Fernvale?

Christine: The support, the fact that it has free childcare and I can actually do my schooling as well as be a parent

Are you doing your senior here at the moment?

Christine: Mmm mm I'm doing my senior and a Certificate II in Community Services as well...

Another young woman spoke of the practical help available at her site:

And did they provide or did you go to them for any kind of help when you were having your baby?

Maxine (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): A teacher from [another school] who is now working at 'It's Up to You' - when he found out that I was pregnant, he got onto some of his friends and a

child care at Indooroopilly. He got me a cot, a rocking chair, a pram, sheets, baby clothes. He just gave me the best head start that I could have ever possibly gotten.

While the backgrounds of the students were diverse, common elements included resolute life ambitions and a strong work ethic. Many of the students also put a great deal of effort into attending school – some juggled work and/or caring responsibilities while others travelled significant distances to maintain their connection to learning.

During an interview with one young student who attended a flexi school/centre in South East Queensland it emerged that her daily trip to the school took 90 minutes (when the buses were on time). It also emerged that on the way to school she passed several other mainstream schools - the closest of which was just a 5 minute walk from her home. Clearly there were highly motivating factors making her put up with a long trip on public transport every day to get to school, when she could stroll just a few minutes down the road to the local high school. Data from this project reveal that this was not an isolated case. The young people interviewed for this project frequently commented upon their renewed enthusiasm for learning and their willingness to travel long distances to their school/centre:

Do you live along way from here?

Oscar (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): Yeah I live up near [outer suburb Brisbane]; it's along way but it's worth it really ...they reimburse the tickets.

Is the travelling hard?

Maxine (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): Oh it's a bit hard, like, especially in the mornings, like, I struggle to get here at nine thirty trying to get the baby ready and everything and be on the bus by eight o'clock.

So why do you make that effort, what is it about this place that gets you up in the morning and gets you here?

Maxine: Because I can still have my education, my son can come and it's, like, I don't know, it's so much different to a school like you have a really good relationship and bond with the teachers and other students. No one looks at you differently, everyone gets along with everyone.

Another common factor amongst the students was their identification of what they liked about alternative schools and the features that inspired them to enrol and maintain attendance. These included the learning programs, the environment, teaching strategies and relationships. The following sub-section reviews our data around each of these elements.

The Research Findings (cont.)

Who goes to flexible learning schools/centres?



The Research Findings (cont.)

Why do young people attend these centres?

1. Learning Programs

Why do young people attend these centres?

1. LEARNING PROGRAMS

Across all sites visited, there were opportunities for young people to undertake traditional subjects and curricula. For instance, at some centres students could obtain a Queensland Certificate of Education by undertaking Queensland Studies authority subjects. There was also a focus on learning work skills and opportunities with experiences in local workplaces. There were also opportunities to combine regular subjects with some programs focusing on obtaining vocational certificates. Julia, a senior teacher in charge of Woodlands Flexi School described their various programs:

We do a childcare course. We do a Year Ten PAYS – Preparing Adolescent Youth for Success. We also utilise community programs such as Youth Pathways which is about keeping students in school, getting them early identification of any problems such as mental illness, anxiety – that sort of thing. This is our Work on Trial program – so our Work on Trial, that's our WOT, they do a Cert II in Retail so it's very much work based - you know, this is what industry expects – let's learn about it. We do literacy and numeracy but we do it through that program so we might do numeracy and it might be reading an order form and interpreting it. It could

be putting in an order form. So they're still learning their literacies and numeracies but it more of a work focus. Our Work on Trial kids are students who just want to focus on employment etc and our Year Elevens and Twelve students want to probably pursue even tertiary education. We have a very close link with a local university and we have a MOU which is a Memorandum of Understanding... they have sponsored positions in their tertiary preparation course. Our Year Twelves are eligible to do that in semester one and then if they pass that they can do a head start program in semester two – off to uni.

The opportunity to obtain vocational qualifications was common across a number of the sites. At The Garage, in addition to opportunities to undertake regular curricula – taken up by very few young people, there was the 'Connections' program designed to help young people re-enter the schooling process. It also offered a program called Autom8, which enabled young people to work towards an automotive certificate. Similarly at Victoria Meadows Flexi School, in addition to standard curricula, students had the opportunity to obtain barista and Responsible Service of Alcohol certificates. Fernvale Education Centre ran a standard curriculum but there was a strong Indigenous focus. Because of its size and limited resources, Cave Street Flexi School was only able to offer a limited program. Its focus was on helping students to complete Access 10 and/or TAFE Certificates in English and Mathematics.

Learning programs offered by flexible learning centres thus vary depending on the type of flexi school/centre it happens to be. Some are classed as 'schools' whilst others are 'centres' and 'work sites'. Accordingly, there is a diversity of offerings and students have to seek out the site that will give them the best chance of fulfilling their goals. Students frequently commented on the need for greater access to such facilities:

Mary (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): If they created more of these small schools – like, say in just main suburban areas – then I reckon it would have a huge popular demand and kids would be saved from going down the wrong track.

Most students talked of wanting to finish school – to complete Years 11 and 12, some wanting to pursue tertiary studies. One of the sites we visited had developed a relationship with a local university:

Renee (Woodlands Flexi School): The good thing is that... if you've been through Year 11 and 12 you can do the Tertiary Preparation Program which will get you into uni... Even if I move out of home later on I can still have that option ...

Other sites focused more upon Year 10 courses, (e.g. in woodworking, automotive engineering literacy and numeracy), and vocational education (e.g. certificate courses linked to TAFE/ traineeships or apprenticeships). Work experience was a common feature of many programs. Students appreciated the more hands-on approach:

Graham (The Garage): It's more like you're out in the real world, like you start at an early age to see how real mechanics work and real work is done, so it's better than school. This is training to get an apprenticeship. Then if we pass this course we get sent out on work experience [so we can do it before we finish] and graduate – so we can get a job after that. What I'm hoping to do when I finish and graduate, get my certificate and find an apprenticeship.

Some offered a mix of courses:

Joan (Fernvale Education Centre): Half the courses they offer are certificate courses, so when you leave school you have your Year 12 Certificate, as well as a visual arts certificate, a community services certificate, your hospitality certificate.

Claire (Fernvale Education centre): So they're just giving you like these stepping stones that are going to better you for once you get out. Plus they're always offering traineeships. They've always got courses going if you want to do an extra one.

There were also opportunities to do short courses which help with employment, e.g. barista training, first aid courses:

Mary (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): I think for a while I was really lost with what I wanted to do for a career but then getting through this photography program actually opened my mind up to something I really want to do. So I'm focused now on doing photography as a career. And I got my Responsible Service and Alcohol Certificate, like if I wanted to work in café or bar... I can do that if I want a part-time job.

Programs offered at flexi schools/centres also offered courses and activities that contribute to the personal development of the young people who attend them. Art and music, music production, animation, photography, field trips, community service and a great variety of life skills (e.g. cooking, sport, personal fitness) were offered in varying degrees across the sites we visited. Sharon a student from Victoria Meadows Flexi School commented:

The music program has been consistently amazing and wonderful. They've had the right teachers at the right times... I think the big difference is the fact that they've got their basic maths and English classes, but they have this huge variety of art subjects.

Apart from the academic offerings, across all of the sites there were commonalities about the environments that facilitated the engagement of young people. These included flexibility and inclusive environments founded upon supportiveness, respect and positivity. These attributes also underpinned the teacher/student relationships present in these sites.

2. ENVIRONMENT

The environments at the various centres all tended to be far more relaxed than those found in traditional mainstream schools. Issues in respect to attendance, uniforms, assessment deadlines and behaviour were handled with greater flexibility and an on-going staff-student dialogue. In terms of attendance and assessment deadlines, for example, Robert, a student from Woodlands Flexi School stated:

'Cause you get flexible hours here and stuff, if you're working then you can pick the day you need to do subjects on... I only do two subjects here. I'm only doing English and Maths at the moment; I'm hopefully going to be doing full-time now.

A core aspect of all of the centres, many of which have waiting lists, was that attendance was voluntary. The centres did not want to be sites which young people were compelled to attend. For instance, a social worker, Angela, from Victoria Meadows Flexi School indicated:

The Research Findings (cont.)

Why do young people attend these centres?

1. Learning Programs
2. Environment



The Research Findings (cont.)

Why do young people attend these centres?

2. Environment

We work from a framework... informed by adult education models so that... anyone who comes here has to want to come here. We can't operate with young people who have to come, who are mandated to come and who don't want to; it's okay if they're mandated and they want to but it has to be that personal drive to come. So that's how we operate we say, 'well, aren't you here because you want to be here and didn't you say that you wanted to do this?'

Students also identified a sense of common purpose and community as significant elements of their alternative schooling environment:

Molly (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): I think they do the community group meetings well... bringing everyone together and sorting out conflicts and everyone having their say. And these little meetings is a really good thing... because it lowers the chances of anyone having any sort of fights or arguments so everyone has their own opinion – so it brings people together as a one community.

For many of the workers this was about developing a sense of community at the site. This form of community and the ways in which they were treated in it, appeared to be a key factor in ensuring that the young people remained in the educational programs offered at the site. It was often suggested that this sense of community was not something readily available in mainstream schools. For instance, Henry, coordinator of Victoria Meadows Flexi School, noted:

... young people have come from a long way for various reasons and I don't know, but (I think) young people come because it's safe - safe to be and to find out what it is to be a gay teenager because the school they came from isn't capable of making them feel safe about that.

George, responsible for the Art program, at the same flexi school, shared this view about the community there:

I think the other strength that this place offers is a place where difference is accepted, where alternative viewpoints are accepted, [and] alternative lifestyles are accepted in a safe and respectful environment where your ability to succeed in academic endeavours isn't the be all and end all of you as a person.

Similar views were articulated by Peter, manager of The Garage:

I think generally speaking it is a place where they can get a feeling of belonging, where they can get a feeling that it's a place... to go that doesn't have

that strict classroom-type feel about it. That they do have certain freedoms... (but) I call it education by stealth, the education's not spoon fed or forced down their throat. A lot of the education in literacy and numeracy and so forth is delivered out on the floor; if they've got to prepare a job for instance, I mean they're learning literacy. If they're working out the cost of a repair to a vehicle they're learning sums - numeracy.

As indicated by Peter, positive, community caring helps to ensure that students engage with the school's curriculum. This was echoed by other workers at other sites:

Juliet (Cave Street Flexi School): Well my number one thing that I've learnt here in order to gain their cooperation - because many of them... are a bit anti 'teacher' so once they know they're safe – [it is about] consistency of treatment, so no screaming, no shouting from myself, or from the youth workers.

Penny (Fernvale Education centre): It [Fernvale] gives them 'a face'... and it's because of the positive regard policy that we have here, even when you walk in, you know - 'Hello, how are you, it's great to see you here. I haven't seen you for a few days it's great that you're back'. Melinda stresses that to us all the time, and you know, really it's common courtesy – a smile. You know, 'How are you?' And reconnecting with the girls if they've told you something about one of their hobbies, 'Oh how did you go on the weekend?'

This sentiment was captured by a student speaking to the social worker, Angela, at Victoria Meadows Flexi School:

The one thing that this young person said to me the other day which I thought was kind of interesting was she said, 'Oh it's like Victoria Meadows recognises that you have a life'.

To some extent respect for the students means forgetting or ignoring their past, seeing this 'educational journey' as some of the workers referred to it, as a new start. The head of the flexi school at Woodlands stated that:

Julia: Now we do get students with a rap sheet, you know ten pages long of behaviour issues... and I'll say, I interview every student and I'll say, 'look yep, yeah this is the past, okay, yeah all right I really want to talk about your future and I don't want to see this here' and then we sort of put that to the side and 'right, what do you want, why do you want to be here?'

The Research Findings (cont.)

Why do young people attend these centres?

A similar view was provided by Charles from The Garage:

The biggest thing I think is here we actually give them self-worth, which is, with a lot of them it's lacking and the first day they come in we do an induction and it's normally me that does it but as a group of staff members we have this thing; you don't have to earn our respect, you've got it, it's harder to keep. If you keep the respect, life's sweet. You lose it, it takes a lot to get it back. And most of them try to keep that because we don't tell them they have to earn it, it's something that's given freely.

Accepting students for who they are was a key feature of the philosophy at Cave Street Flexi School:

Juliet (teacher): They like the attention - individual attention. They have some plans for themselves for the future. They like each other. They have fun when they come here. They have the right to smoke - some of them are quite addicted and can't go because the classes are two hours in length. Now I think that's really quite challenging them to, I mean we do get up occasionally and go for a walk just around the classroom or outside, I mean it's just really a car park! We negotiate smoke breaks.

At Woodlands, it was suggested that treating the sites as places for punishing young people for not appearing to fit in with mainstream schools would be counterproductive. For instance, Julia, the flexi school head there, stated:

You don't want it to be something where kids feel embarrassed to go to... [because] you must be dumb or naughty. You want it to be an alternative education where you can come [and] choose the program that you need to do to get to your goal - that's the key... We're not a dumping ground; we're not here about punishment we're about you making the choice.

The respect that students felt was also a big factor, both between staff and students and amongst students as well:

Molly (Victoria Meadows Flexi School):... Respect... it's one of our four Rs. It's not a place where you can relax and be cool and do drugs and not do your schoolwork because that's not what we're about.

Len (The Garage): They just really treat you more like an adult so it's more like a workplace than a school...

The positive focus of schools was also important, both in terms of young people feeling 'celebrated' (not just accepted), and being able to relax in a positive environment:

Claire (Fernvale Education Centre): I was pregnant and everyone (here) was going, 'Oh look you're pregnant, look at that little bump!' Whereas at (previous school) it was like 'Hide it', you know, 'We don't want to see it'!

Renee (Woodlands Flexi School): Oh yeah everyone's pretty laidback... and we all talk to each other, and the good thing is there's no actual real bullying here.

Chas (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): Yeah everyone's really nice here like you can pretty much just go up and talk to anyone they're all nice people they don't judge you or anything.

Thus, the environments of these alternative schooling sites provided supportive contexts for the delivery of their curricula. This support extended to the provision of services not often found within mainstream schools. Many of the sites resembled what has come to be known as 'full service schooling'. This full service schooling took into account the various needs of students occurring beyond the school grounds. Students noted a variety of significant support systems in place at flexi schools/centres:

Claire (Fernvale Education Centre): If you're wanting to get away from your family problems you just come to school. You know you can talk to one of the teachers or one of the youth workers and just nut it out...

Rebecca (Woodlands Flexi School): There's this kid called Sid and I think he like ran away or something and they gave him money to go down to the Salvos to get some clothes and he has a shower here and everything, and they've got food here. Then they've got a counsellor and sometimes there are some people that come in and they talk to you.

Molly (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): Hopefully by my sixteenth birthday in September I want to be able to have a job, get myself going so I can move out of home because I want to learn how to be independent before I actually am independent with my own job and my career and family. I've told (the centre) about that and they're obviously going to help me find a job and they have career-work pathways.

The levels of support provided within these alternative schools also underpinned the teaching and learning relationships fostered within these sites.

3. TEACHING RELATIONSHIPS: 'YEAH THEY TREAT US LIKE THE PEOPLE THAT WE COULD BE (WITHOUT) THAT SUPPORT...'

The relationships that were part of the broader environment in the research schools were reflected in the teaching/learning relationships within the various curricula offered at the sites. These relationships were identified by young people and workers alike as being central to the young people's on-going engagement in the learning processes at the sites:

What do you think people do here that helps you to learn that didn't happen at other schools?

Nick (student from Cave Street Flexi School):

They're a lot more personal and they sit there and help you out and they have time to go round and check on different people. And everyone's at a different level so it's not like you have to keep up with people. You go at your own pace...

The issue of teacher/student relationships and the teaching strategies that flowed from that was a dominant theme within the data from our study. Students frequently used terms such as 'caring', 'small', 'community', 'family', 'respectful', 'equal', 'supportive', 'non-judgemental', and 'mutual responsibility' when discussing their school. The following comments exemplify the many positive endorsements from students:

Christine (Fernvale Education Centre): [It is] extremely different, extremely different [to previous school] because... you can go to anyone when you have a problem. It feels like a big family rather than just, you know, a thousand students all clumped together.

Joan (Fernvale Education Centre): They don't judge you by what is happening in your home life. They'll support you all the way but they won't tell you, 'Absolutely not, you can't come here any more' - they say, 'If you're having a hard time you can just come in'. It feels more like they're trying to help you more than any other school. Like they want you to learn...

Across all schools/centres visited, workers and teachers allowed and encouraged students to call them by their first name. This practice definitely seemed to contribute to a breaking down of teacher/student barriers:

Mary (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): Well we're calling teachers by their first name because you have had a connection with them. I mean we don't call them 'teachers' we call them workers and so they're pretty much our friends and so they're, you know, they're on the same level as us. Like -

we get called by our first name and we call them by their first name so it's like an equal ground and it makes it so much more easier to connect and be more friendly with them than calling them Mrs or Mr.

Supporting arguments made in a lot of the academic literature about early school leaving, the evidence derived from this study shows that for young people who are most at risk of dropping out, it is the emotional labour of the teachers and workers that makes a difference. Moreover, the pedagogy that flows from the closer relationships seems to engage and motivate students as exemplified in the following response:

What are the main ways that this is different from mainstream schools?

Oscar (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): It's just a lot more relaxed. I mean, you've got your assessments and your assignments to do but it's not like if you don't do them you're gonna fail completely - no, you can come back and you can do it again. I mean you've got time to do things.

The students we interviewed seemed well aware of the difficulties facing teachers, particularly the challenge of attending to all students in large classes:

Do you think there's anything that mainstream schools can learn from what goes on here?

Mary (Victoria Meadows Flexi School): One of the biggest problems I had was getting attention... I think the teachers concentrate too much on the students who do really well and they kind of forget about the students who really need the help. I think what this school... offers equal education to everybody. And I think that's why our mainstream schools need to learn [that] it's hard for a teacher to look after so many students - but at the same time then, they should have more of a personal connection with more students.

Many students commented on the effectiveness of teaching strategies that they described as 'real life', 'hands on', 'connected' and 'conversational'. Teachers gave them sufficient time and assistance to complete their work:

Mark (Woodlands Flexi School): Its more like life skills kind of thing as well - it's not sit down and do it in a book, read from a book kind of thing. It's teaching you how to kind of live I think...

Joan (Fernvale Education Centre): They'll come [teachers/workers] and talk to you and check up on how you're doing. Like, if you don't understand something they'll come and help you and it's just, they're more supportive.

The Research Findings (cont.)

Why do young people attend these centres?

3. Teaching relationships: 'Yeah they treat us like the people that we could be (without) that support...'

The Research Findings (cont.)

Why do young people attend these centres?

3. Teaching relationships: 'Yeah they treat us like the people that we could be (without) that support...'

Limitations

Mia (Cave Street Flexi School): It's self-paced and, yeah, you don't have work just thrown at you and be expected to do it in a certain amount of time.

Glen (The Garage): It's more relaxed. You get more time if you want more breaks or something. You just work at your own pace...

Claire (Fernvale Education Centre): Like, I can be in the classroom all day doing English and Maths and all that and then at the end of the day I have Art or something – sit there, chill out, listen to music, do my painting...

David (Cave Street Flexi School): Everyone was just leaving me out, helping everyone else because I was one of the dumbest people in the class... I feel a lot better about myself now [with the teachers helping us]... Learnt more here than I did at normal school anyway – in the two months that I've been here ...

Such comments are not meant to suggest that there are not tensions and conflicts at these centres. However, it is the flexible ways in which they are dealt with that make a difference:

Julia (senior teacher in charge Woodlands Flexi School): So really, we don't have a behaviour management problem - if kids misbehave here I'll always talk to them – 'What's going on today? Did something happen at home?' - And generally, ninety-nine percent of the time they've had a bad day, had a fight with Mum before they came or something happened and we will just tell them, look go home. That's our behaviour management policy – 'Go [and when they're ready to come back and learn] come back, and we have a re-entry interview' – so they come back to school and we just discuss it before they go back into class; so we don't really let situations blow up to the point where it becomes conflict. We just say, 'Look you're not ready today, go home'.

Thus it can be seen that the academic programs provided at these alternative schools/centres were underpinned by a supportive environment that was cognisant of students' diverse circumstances and needs, and sought to ensure that the learning provided was meaningful to students.

Limitations

Whilst we have been extremely impressed by all of the sites that we have visited, we are not seeking to idealise or romanticise any them. At times in some of the sites, the learning we saw being provided was very functional, but not necessarily intellectually challenging. We would suggest that attention should be given to ensuring that pathways through flexi schools facilitate progression towards personally meaningful goals for students. For instance, one teacher, Juliette from Cave Street, was concerned that the focus on literacy and numeracy within her site was a limiting aspect of the school.

...it's only a limited curriculum I always make sure that in the enrolment process I make it clear... to them that it's not a comprehensive education. If they come here they will be missing out on a comprehensive education – it's a very narrow focus.

Another teacher, Rhys from Woodlands, was concerned that the education provided at his site was not particularly 'alternative'. As he stated:

I suppose I always secretly hoped that it was more of an alternative education in the Seventies' sense here, you know where we were all a little bit alternative and rebellious I suppose bit anti-mainstream, well not anti-mainstream but an alternative to mainstream and you know all the things that go with that like the middle subconscious, the arty sort of stuff and the 'musical' sort of stuff. I suppose that all suits me and my personality.

However, he did go on to suggest that perhaps the students at his school were not looking for such an alternative:

I more and more realise that they're here against their will in this alternative culture – they would really prefer to be doing well in a mainstream sense.

Such comments indicate a range of differing notions of what alternative schools should provide. They are indicative of the need to avoid narrow definitions of 'alternative' education. Our view is that there should be a wide range of options available to students in order to serve a diverse range of needs, and hence students' functional, academic, philosophical and artistic reasons for choosing alternative sites.



CONCLUSION

The research presented in this report has focussed on the practices in five alternative education sites in South East Queensland. Each of these sites was very different in terms of the origins, sponsors, programs offered and student body.

However, despite these differences there were many commonalities regarding the practices employed to meet the educational needs of students who, as one teacher from the study indicated, had 'fallen through the fingers of society'. A significant testament to the success of these practices was the commitment demonstrated by many of the students to attending the school. In each of the sites we visited there were students who were prepared to travel long distances, often on public transport, to attend the school. Important to this commitment was the way in which the workers within the sites were perceived by students as being concerned with more than their academic needs. In every site students commented on the approachability of the teachers, the respect shown

to them by teachers and on the other forms of support that their school provided. We would suggest that schools of this type play a significant and important role in the re-engagement of students who have either rejected or been rejected by mainstream education. However, we have noted the major adversities, in terms of security of funding, job security and working conditions that confront workers in these sites which affect the stability of the programs offered and long term sustainability of the sites. We have also stressed that these sites need to be regarded as providing a real and meaningful 'alternative' and not be used as dead end pathways for students deemed to be not suited to mainstream education. If the Federal Government agenda to obtain 90% Year 12 attainment by 2015 is to be achieved, then those practices found within these alternative sites which have encouraged students marginalised from schooling to reengage with education will need to be valued within the mainstream.

Furthermore, this agenda will be facilitated by ensuring that the kinds of sites exemplified within this study receive the levels of support necessary to their on-going sustainability.

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APPENDIX 1: DETAILS OF THE 5 SITES

	Woodlands Flexi School	Victoria Meadows Flexi School	Fernvale Education Centre	Cave Street Flexi School	The Garage
SPONSOR	Campus of local state school. Has own P & C Committee (auspic)	Church body in partnership with a Local Government Authority	Church Body	Local youth service, with funding support from nearby high schools	Charitable Institution
STAFF	<p>Teachers: 5</p> <p>Administrative: 1</p> <p>Work experience coordinator: 1</p> <p>The school also receives visits from external staff such as the Youth Support Coordinator and a youth worker from local youth service.</p>	<p>Teachers: FTE 4</p> <p>Admin: FTE 1.5</p> <p>School Officer - Families Program: 0.8</p> <p>Community Development Officers: 3</p> <p>Volunteers - Families Program: 1.2</p> <p>Learning Program: 0.5</p> <p>Sessional Workers - Music: 0.8</p> <p>Chaplain: 0.8</p> <p>Youth Support Coordinator: 0.3</p> <p>Community Health Nurse: 0.2</p>	<p>Teachers: 10</p> <p>Youth Workers / Teacher Aides: 12</p> <p>Administration: 4</p> <p>Management: 3.5</p> <p>Kitchen & Maintenance: 3</p> <p>Bus-driver: 1</p>	<p>Teacher: 1</p> <p>Youth Worker: 1</p> <p>Receives administration support from its auspice agency.</p>	<p>Teachers/Support Staff = 3</p> <p>Admin staff: 1</p>
STUDENTS	61	88 (FTE = 47) student enrolled.. However, overall the school engaged with 124 young people throughout the year.	107	21	18
AGES	14.5 to 18	15 to 21	12 to 25	14 to 16	12
CO-ED OR SINGLE SEX	Co-ed	Co-ed	All Girls	Co-ed	Co-ed
CURRICULUM OFFERINGS	<p>Year 10:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-Vocational Maths English Communication Social and Community Studies Science & Technology Literacy Numeracy Personal Development programs: ifestyles, Youth Pathways and Rock & Water <p>Year 11 & 12:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-Vocational Maths English Communication Social and Community Studies Creative Arts Information Communication Technology Cert II in Children's Services Recreation studies Literacy Numeracy Work Experience Personal Development programs: Youth Pathways and Rock & Water 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technology and Business (need to confirm this ASAP) Mathematics - Creative Arts English Communication Social and Community Studies Ethics Literacy and numeracy Certificate II in Music Production (at the time this was unaccredited, but APLFC was waiting on approval for the course to be accredited) Art and Music (non-accredited) Outdoor recreation opportunities Cooking and basic life skills. Fitness and gymnasium Program Health and nutrition 	<p>Year 8-10:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> English Mathematics Science Study of Society and Environment Visual Art Health and Physical Education <p>Year 11 & 12:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> English Communication or Senior English Pre-vocational Mathematics or Maths A Social and Community Studies Recreation Certificate I in Hospitality (Operations) Certificate II in: Workplace Practices, Visual Arts and Contemporary Crafts and Business Other senior subjects can be accessed through the Brisbane School of Distance Education. Students are also able to undertake a range of Vocational Education Courses at the school, TAFE, Colleges or at other Training sites. 	<p>Access 10 for those who want it (which is most students)</p> <p>English, Mathematics, life skills and social skills</p>	<p>Certificate I in Automotive</p> <p>Access 10 – Science, English, Mathematics</p>

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