How do we really engage young adults in education?

By Dr Geoff Plimmer

From www.CASEL.org

Young adults are often pathologised as dangerous and unworthy. This helps existing power structures and mutes calls for innovation by deflecting attention from how schools can better serve their learners. Consequently teachers remain unsatisfied because they are in school environments that are often unresponsive to student needs. In this article I'll outline my own experience of developing student engagement approaches and what it is like to implement them in schools.

This article is political. It undermines calls for the education system to return to "basics", and instead argues for socio-emotional learning (SEL) as a means of engagement. Teaching emotional coping and social skills to school-aged youths is an effective means of improving academic achievement, reducing truancy and cutting anti-social behaviour, according to a review article in the American Psychologist (Greenberg et al., 2003). But changing practices in schools can be very difficult to do, because of the weight of practical, historical and cultural pressure to resist innovation.

About Socio-Emotional Learning

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) provides a framework for teaching many of the attributes we expect youth to have, but often don't, and which often aren't taught to those who need it (Elias et al., 2003). SEL is defined as:

> "the process of acquiring the skills to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively".

SEL programmers help youths to recognise and manage other people's emotions, respect others, set goals and make good decisions. It is similar to emotional intelligence, but includes goal-setting, motivation and performance.

SEL programmes tend to work best when they are focused on building competence, improving connections with others and contributing to the community (Greenberg et al., 2003).

How to make it Work

The evidence generally points to the increased success of approaches that focus on strengths, rather than those that concentrate on a specific problem such as drug taking (Greenberg et al., 2003). Ideally, programmes should:

1. Be sustained - because short-term behavioural programmes get short-term results
2. Cross school, family and individual domains
3. Consider the school's ecology and climate
4. Include the chance to practice the skills, using a model based on the individual's strengths, not weaknesses

This is an extensive list, but programmes can be effective with less. The idea is that if you get social and emotional skills right, then a whole basket of negatives such as drug taking and crimes diminish. It is a shift from a deficit model to a positive psychology model (Eliot et al., 2003).

What Goes Wrong?

However, the results of SEL programmes are often more disappointing than they could be because the tuition is applied in a fragmented, disruptive manner that fails to give teachers and other professionals enough resources to do them well. Programmes often seem remote and imposed, and don't give adequate voice to either teacher or student perspectives. Our approach is to see students and teachers as agents of change, in ways that give voice to students' personalised goals and help teachers help their students achieve.

Basics of a "Possible Selves" Approach

Possible selves are the thoughts, images, senses and thoughts that people have of their future (Markus & Nurius 1986). Unlike traditional views of people as having a single personality, or of being primarily socially constructed, possible selves theory sees people as having multiple selves, but with a core self concept. Those selves can be both positive and negative (hopes and fears); and people vary in their confidence or anxiety that those hopes and fears will become true. Possible selves deal with the 'total person' – they include family and relationships, identities, emotions, beliefs, values, skills and interests.

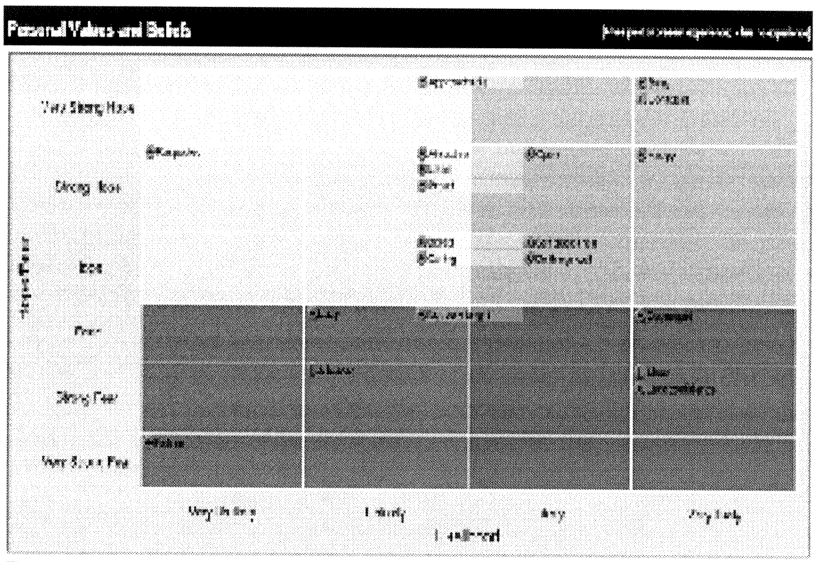


Figure 1: An aggressive students responses to the FutureSelves questionnaire. Through a series of quick exercises the student identified a series of positive opportunities in personal behaviors that increased chances of being respected more likely, and reduced chances of being depressed, mean or lacking confidence. The focus of the exercises was around what sort of persona he wanted to be, and how to "get there".

In the top right – the green quadrant – the students identified personal strengths as busy, confident, happy and open. There were times when he was like this. In the middle are hopes that are less certain of coming true around being approachable, attractive, liked and proud. On the far left is an unlikely strong hope of being respected. This turned out to be strongly connected to likely fears of being depressed, mean and lacking confidence (bottom right).

An example of a student "at risk" (defined by poor behaviour and poor attendance and achievement) values and beliefs graph is below. In the top right are items rated as likely hoped (termed opportunities in the subsequent discussion). In the top left are hopes rated as likely (termed dreams); in the bottom left are fears rated as unlikely (termed dreads) and in the bottom right are fears rated as likely (termed threats). Students use these graphs as gateways to explore personal meanings, connections across different part of their lives, personal strengths and resources and who they want to be. Once that had taken place career exploration, personal goals and planning take place.

When Things go right - A New Zealand Experience

This article outlines a program in a New Zealand secondary school that radically increased student achievement and motivation. It helped students think about their futures and their choices without pathologising them. It helped them discover their strengths and find matching career opportunities.

Huntly College is a New Zealand secondary school in the Waikato – a coal mining town set in a farming district just south of Auckland. Students are predominantly Maori (about 70%) and the school is classified as Decile One – indicating a high level social and economic disadvantage. In 2004 it trialled a computer based software system called FutureSelves in which students identified their hopes and fears, how likely they were to occur, and whether they had any experience of them. These were then portrayed graphically on graphs that covered skills and interests, career options, values and beliefs, and lifestyle. Student self awareness was enhanced by using the graphs in small groups and one on one settings. They selected career opportunities matching these findings and carried out a series of work book based exercises over 3 to 4 classes. They did this working alongside a trained careers teacher.

This approach differed from traditional career and course selection approaches in several ways. It didn't compare students against norms or tell them what to do, it was comprehensive in that it included personal beliefs and values, and it considered student lifestyles and cultural background. It specifically focussed on their strengths, relationships and emotions. The programme was refined over the following four years, with better work books and teacher materials to engage students – the initial ones were too stark and academic for students. As the program developed students became more receptive to it. Students now approach the teachers, wanting to participate in it.

FutureSelves was introduced to the school gradually, with an initial focus on students at risk of not successfully transitioning to further study, training or employment. In 2005 it was applied primarily to at risk students entering high school at year 10, and seniors (Years 11-13). In 2006 and 2007 all the next Yr10 intakes went through the programme, with some senior students as well.

From 2004 to 2007 academic achievement increased from an average pass rate of 25% to 75% in New Zealand's National Certificate in Educational Achievement Level 1, Levels 2 and 3 following as more students went through FutureSelves (see graph 1 on p. 5 "Huntly College Achievement – NCEA"). Gains in

literacy (see graph 2 on p.5 "Huntly College Achievement – Numeracy and Literacy") have been particularly strong: from 43% pass rate in NCEA prior to FutureSelves, to 80% in 2007 (achievement of formal qualifications)[1].

Student perceptions of the program were gathered through a graphically designed questionnaire in which they marked statements within images that they agreed with, and wrote comments of their own. 75% rated it very highly, and over 90% rated it well, providing positive comments such as "Gave me heaps to think about", "inspiring", "It showed me my future" and "Fun, simple, helpful, cool to do".

Students also wrote about the benefit that they got from it "I have learned to stay at school until I have finished"; "It's made me think about the future and what's in store for me, and "It showed me what I wanted" (and), "That I can work hard at things" and "To believe in myself". 8% of students were ambivalent, stating along with other positive comments that the process was "Not bad, not bad but not great".

Feedback from classroom teachers was it prepared students better for study and career choices and behaviours, and was also useful for data collection. One teacher wrote in an email to me:

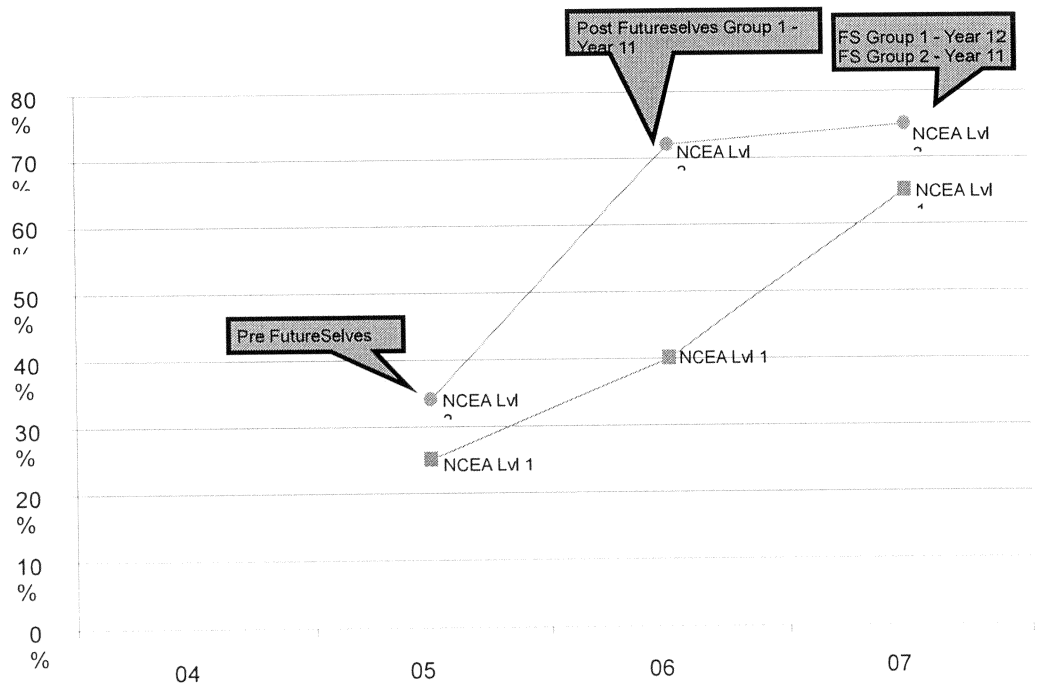
> "I first used the FS questionnaire as a School Counselor who frequently saw students referred through the disciplinary process for undesirable behavior or disengagement in school based learning. This exploration of a preferred future self quickly and effectively connected a student with their hopes and dreams, and gave them a reason for engaging appropriately in the learning activities school provides ...."

> "The 'lights' would go on in a student's face. Their eyes would sparkle, their interest levels would rise, (and) heads (would come up and) to look at you face to face as they realised its relevancy to them. Students, especially the underachieving or uncertain student, appreciate being told 'there are no right or wrong answers'. They realise you are interested in and are talking about 'them.' The (energy) engagement levels and their enthusiasm would increase dramatically!

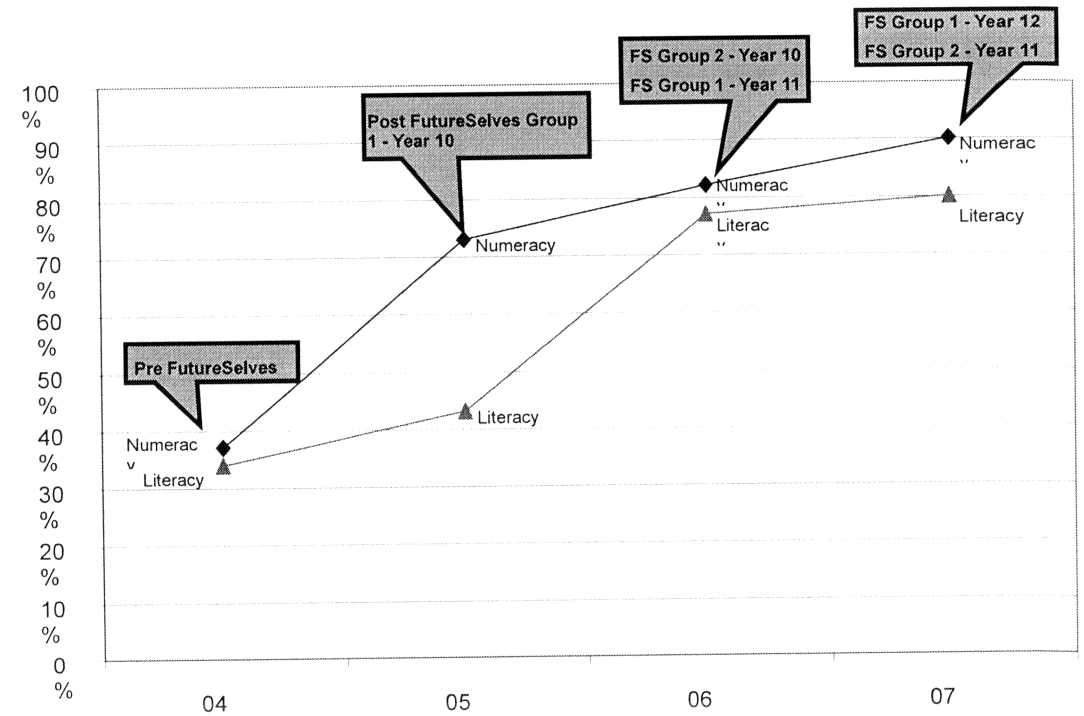
And as a Careers Teacher -

> "In introducing this FutureSelves questionnaire and Learning and Career Planning programme to students, I liken it to abseiling. The Harness - your questionnaire report - must fit YOU, to securely hold you as you connect your rope to a future destination - a future self career options and lifestyle choices - way ahead up the cliff. When those are both in place, you can plan and climb your way up. You might encounter obstacles on the way that may require alternative pathways, facing options with each step, but ultimately with perseverance you will reach the place where you will have much wider view of options to choose from and hopefully the qualifications you need to become that future self you dreamed of.
>
> I really like 'The FutureSelf experience' as an evaluation tool as it has been very effective in re-engaging students in their learning. We revisit and use their future self picture or mind map, to reassess how they are going in their progress to achieving these dreams. This facilitates a reconnection to their hope for a preferred future."
>
> "As Dean of Yr 11 I am having far less hassles than I did with these same students last year. Those students who complete their LCP generally know where they are heading and can make informed and sensible decisions when it comes to subject choices in the following year. It also lets the school gather more data in order to satisfy MOE and ERO. This is where part of the careers is taught."
>
> "These are the best prepared students we have had for Gateway. They know where they are going."

1 Defined as literacy and numeracy achievement levels necessary to be awarded National Certificate of Educational Achievement.



Graph 1: Huntly College Achievement - NCEA



Graph 2: Huntly College Achievement - Numeracy and Literacy

Although these changes are very good, they were not easy to implement – it certainly challenged the original program developer (myself), and it motivated the school to alter its offered curriculum subjects to cover the needs of the students. Wrote the principal:

> "It's a program that allows me to get information about and for the students. … It allows me to build a curriculum programme with that info to shift from what teachers think to what STUDENTS ACTUALLY NEED! This years YR 11's (2006) are a living testimony to that. They are not creating problems for us" [Caps are the Principal's].

The FutureSelves project was probably only kept afloat by some very committed and competent teachers. Since its introduction in 2004 the school has shifted from a substantially "below average" performer to one above average.

In 2007 Te Kotahitanga - a programme set up to train, equip and support teachers in raising the achievement levels of Maori students was introduced into the school. This programme is focussed on changing teaching orientations and behaviours, and so complements the student orientation of the FutureSelves programme.

Conclusion

Programs raising self awareness of future hopes to engage learners can be very effective in schools at raising academic achievement and in improving behaviours. The core purpose outlined here was increased self awareness tied to purpose and action in being at school. However, doing so challenges schools – it raises questions about what to teach, and how to organise socio-emotional learning programmes. These challenges are fundamentally political if education is framed within a back to basics or innovation conversation. Another way to look at it is that how to deal with others, their emotions, and your own, is a pretty basic indeed.

About the Author

Geoff Plimmer (gplimmer@futureselves.co.nz) has a PhD from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. His PhD was on the application of possible selves to career development. In an earlier life he was a public servant. He likes kayaking and tramping in New Zealand's outdoors.

For more information about the Future Selves program e-mail info@futureselves.co.nz or phone +64 4 472 0776.

References

Elias, M., Zins, J.E., Graczyk, P.A., Weissberg, R.P. 2003. Implementation, sustainability, and scaling up of social-emotional and academic innovations in public schools. School Psychology Review, 32, 3, 303-319.

Greenberg, M.T.; Weissberg, R. P.; O'Brien, M. U., Zins, J.E.; Fredericks, L., Resnik, H., Elias, M. J. 2003. Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through coordinated social, emotional, and academic learning. American Psychologist, 58(6-7), 466-474.

Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. American Psychologist, 41(9), 954-969.

Light the fire, Spark it up, and GET NAKED

By Pauline Haber

Traditional schooling does not work - for a lot of people. Many students suffer under a 'white' curriculum, 'white' ideals, 'white' inferences, 'white' rubrics and 'white' marking. If one did not grow up anglo-saxon, it would be fair to say that one would be deemed poor within their schools intellectual economy.

The privileged class do not struggle with a disability, language difficulties or geographic displacement. The wealthy class, need only be present in order to make the most of their schooling. The lower class suffer the shackels of intellectual poverty, in the forms of constant barriers between them and their rightful education. It is as if the knowledge of school is locked behind a door and if you qualify as anglo-australian your key will fit and you will be granted access. If you are not , you will have to mould your key in order to get through the door.

School does not work for lots of people because it is not tailored for the cross section of students represented in schools. Textbooks are outdated representations of the white Australia policy, syllabus remains unchanged and motivation at an all time low (even the privileged class drop out).

So what to do? In order to support the intellectual economy I say we drop class sizes and increase student choice.

What does not work?

A teaching telling you how you should learn.

What works?

A teacher guiding you in the different ways you might choose to learn.

Its simple really, the syllabus should be stripped naked, down to the bare bones so that students can access learning outcomes but tie them to their own social and culturallly relevant experiences. Students should be able to engage in a truly critical curriculum one that questions notions of privelege or poverty within the classroom. One that accomodates the various needs of a class truly representative of your typical Australian School.

The naked syllabus should facillitate group learning as well as individual achievement. Varying forms of assesment should be adopted in order to accomodate the needs of a proudly diverse class. Further to this up to date relevant textbooks should include examples of diversity so that the students can see themselves and relate to their stimulus materials. Team learning should be encouraged in order to overcome the massive drop out rate. The team acts as a kind of glue making sure that all members stick together by attending and completing their schooling to the end.

Programs that do not work focus on individual learning alone, a sort of me against the world mentality. These replicate the school model that the young person was running from and they offer no social rewards, only punishments such as marks taken off when an assignment piece is handed in late. Further to this one must not forget that those who drop out of school also move into a job where they do not feel that

they are making a valuable contribution. These jobs are dangerous, they may pay the bills but they cannot pay for a sense of belonging or achievement that a young person is looking for. These kinds of jobs not only rob from a young persons well-being they create a kind of emotional debt, that grows as each year passes by, eventually building into a slight depression.

Yet I digress, the key to engaging young people is to get them talking, pick topical issues, study what they are interested in. Ask them questions to **light the fire**. **Spark up** at their suggestions (take interest) and last but not least get naked, bring everyone back to the meaning it has personally to them.

About the Author

Pauline Haber is 23 and living out her "things to try before I die" list. So far she has been published as an opinion writer for Actnow, had her poetry published in an ezine called *onefifty* and written a chapter in a senior Food Technology Textbook. She has done promotions for the Australian Electoral Commission, sewed lounge covers for the Big Day out and worked for Apple. Pauline will graduate this year from a combined teaching and design degree ... but as she puts it, "the world is wide and there are jobs out there I've yet to try."

Authors Note: This article is intended to only take aim at white textsbooks which are biased, no racism, sexism or gender based discrimination is intended in any way. It is trusted you will read this in good humour as it was written.

Seeking brighter futures

By Susanne Koen and Phillipa Duigan

Ever since he can remember, 'John' has been passionate about cars. A couple of years ago, when they were both living with his mum, he and his older brother rebuilt an engine for the 1989 Holden. But last year his mum remarried, his brother moved away and John went to live with his dad. Life wasn't quite the same any more and John felt like he'd lost his best friend. School was boring and irrelevant: English classes were the worst, especially as he was always getting teased for being a slow reader. He couldn't really see the point in the English lessons anyway—didn't have anything to do with his dream of being a mechanic—and it simply became easier for everyone if he just wagged the classes.

At first it was only the odd day he'd take off, but the more days he missed, the harder it was to go back. He got suspended a couple of times for 'back chatting' the teacher about his reading and his dad got pretty mad at him. John's dad was struggling with depression anyway and finding it hard to hold down his job. John now had three step sisters; he got on with them OK, but John reckoned they needed his mum and dad more than he did and it was just better to get out most of the time. He was happiest just getting on his bike and going for long rides to the beach; no one could hassle him if he was on his own. By the middle of term 1, John was only going to school for one or two days a week and was in danger of dropping out completely.

How many issues is 'John' dealing with? There's family breakdown, loss of significant family figures in his mother and brother, a perceived lack of school relevance, possible dyslexia, and difficulty with relationships leading to isolation and loneliness, as well as issues around school behaviour, his father's mental health, and John's own attendance. Other young people may be facing early parenthood, drug and alcohol issues or they might be living independently. Many young people who have had difficult family lives may be lacking in social skills and have little self esteem and resilience. What becomes abundantly clear is the complexity of issues some young people are facing.

Recognising this complexity and that the task of improving school retention would not be easy, in 2003 the South Australian Government asked the newly established Social Inclusion Board to come up with a School Retention Action Plan (SRAP) which would trial projects to find ways to retain young people in learning and earning pathways. Funding of $28.4 million over four years was provided for the initiative. The Social Inclusion Board, which reports to the Premier, is well placed to work across a number of government portfolios and this is the approach it has taken in trialling ways to address the raft of issues young people might be facing.

By far the largest of the SRAP initiatives is the Innovative Community Action Networks (ICAN), which was funded with $7.4 million over four years. Since 2004, ICAN has been working with schools and local community partners to develop innovative and flexible ways to engage and retain young people who have dropped out of learning pathways or who are at significant risk of doing so. ICANs work with local communities and agencies to address the flexible learning needs of at risk young people in South Australian Department of Education and Children's Service (DECS) schools in four areas of the State: the metropolitan northern, southern and north western

suburbs of Adelaide, and the Upper Spencer towns of Port Pirie, Port Augusta and Whyalla.

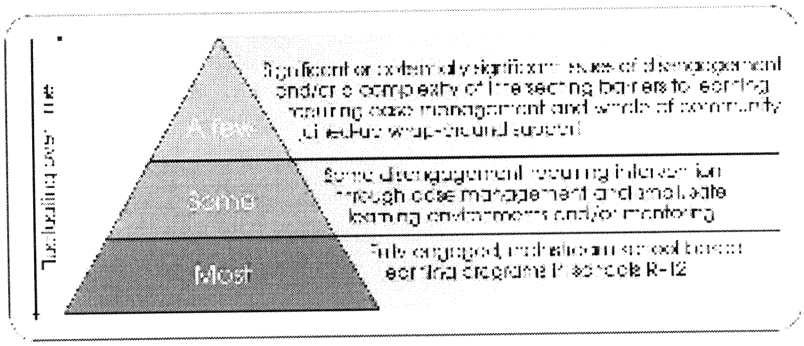
Who's dropping out?

Most young people are engaged in full-time traditional learning at school. However, up to 30% of young people become disengaged to some degree at some point in their schooling and require extra

community-based learning options and whole of community support.

If they want to leave, why keep them on?

Young people who complete their schooling can look forward to far brighter future prospects: research has demonstrated that their future health, social status and employment



support. This may occur at recognised critical periods when disengagement is more likely to occur, such as when transitioning from primary to secondary school, around school leaving age and during the last year of schooling. Support might be provided through school or community mentoring, with additional support, including case management, either within the school or from external sources in the community. However, if the needs of these young people are not addressed, they may become at risk of disengagement from learning.

A small group of people, about 10%, require more intensive support. Some may still be attending school, although often only erratically, and they are likely to be at severe risk of complete disengagement. Others will already have completely disengaged from any form of learning. Yet others may have been in custodial care in a juvenile justice setting and may be assisted to engage in

opportunities are greatly enhanced if they remain in school to complete year 12. However, not only do they profit as individuals, but the wider community benefits too, both socially and economically, when young people complete school and become active citizens. Recognising this, ICAN works in partnership with agencies, both government and non-government, local business and industry, community partners, schools and further education institutions, as well as the young people themselves, to find local solutions to re-engaging young people who have either dropped out or are at extreme risk of doing so.

So...what can we do about it?

Working with young people who are at risk of disengagement through to those who are chronically disengaged, ICANs

have seen an extraordinary track record, with 82% of young people returning to learning or earning pathways. What is more, these young people have improved connections with community and, in communities where this is measurable, youth offending has dropped significantly and social prosperity has increased as young people are more engaged with their communities as well as their school or learning space.

The key to success is recognising the complexity of needs each individual young person is facing and addressing these needs through an individual case management approach, supported in joined-up ways through partnerships with a range of local agencies, both government and non-government. In more extreme cases, addressing 'case management for living' will highlight whether there are needs which must be met before learning or earning can even be considered, such as homelessness, extreme poverty or serious health issues, and providing services which 'wrap around' the individual.

For example, an ICAN program in the Adelaide northern suburbs is successfully re-engaging a number of 12–15 year olds from a number of schools who were chronic non-attenders. Through the RISE program, young people are case managed by Services to Youth, who refer young people with housing or health needs to other agencies, whilst liaising with the young people's school of enrolment. Mission Australia provide an off-campus learning space where young people work in small groups to acquire individually identified needs, including life skills, literacy and numeracy, all of which are mapped to outcomes from the South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework. 'It works fantastically having the double agencies', says the youth worker: 'What they can't provide, I can. What I can't provide, they can'.

Nothing changes when things stay the same!

Returning young people to learning pathways provides more than just an opportunity to acquire vital skills in literacy and numeracy: school, or an alternative learning establishment, is also the greatest protective factor for young people. For example, young people who are in dysfunctional home or living situations may find that the only positive role models are those at school or in their community learning environment. 'Sometimes we are the only balanced people that some of these young people connect with,' explains an ICAN program coordinator.

However, schools and learning spaces also need to ensure that learning is young person centred and tailored to each individual through 'case management for learning'. If young people see no relevance to their learning, if they feel disempowered by their lack of learning choices, or if they feel they are not treated as individuals because school systems are inflexible, they will not re-engage. On the other hand, young people who are invited to play an active role in their learning, in environments which take a flexible approach, are far more likely to successfully re-engage with and continue their learning. It is student focussed learning plans that are the key to successful engagement and retention.

The Bridges program, supported by ICAN, offers opportunities for young people who left school early to return to study in an off campus environment. It caters for those who live independently,

young parents and those who work part time by offering a flexible timetable and support in independent learning. Furthermore, through partnerships with agencies, young people are building networks with their local communities so that they are empowered by knowing where and how to access support should they need it in their lives.

Other schools are working in clusters to provide case management, liaising with schools and agencies so that a range of programs may be offered to identified young people who present with a range of interests and a diversity of issues. 'One of the biggest barriers for young people is schools not understanding what community services do from day to day and how they operate', explains Hugh Serfontein, Project Manager of the ICAN supported Flexible Funding Model, in which a number of schools cluster together across the southern metropolitan area.

Yet another ICAN supported program, the Flipcentre at John Pirie Secondary School in Port Pirie, is located at the school. Recognising the high percentage of students with complex requirements and that many of these are at risk of not completing school, the centre was established as a flexible learning centre to provide case management and one on one support to help young people get back into learning. At the same time, supported by agencies and in conjunction with BoysTown, the program offers alternative off-campus learning to a group of young chronically disengaged boys, many of whom also have juvenile justice issues. The program, both on and off campus, has become highly successful and the Flipcentre is now also used by young people, some of whom are taking extension subjects, who self select to go there as an alternative working space. Most recently the secondary school has established stronger connections with feeder primary schools so that transition programs can be offered to year 7s considered at risk when moving into high school. 'From a social justice perspective, we owe these young people the opportunities this will provide', explains the Flipcentre coordinator, Bruce Miles.

Tailoring approaches

ICAN programs are diverse to meet a diverse number of individuals. Frequently programs have addressed the needs of young people by adapting curriculum content. For example, the Young Mums on the Move program has successfully re-engaged over 60 young women who were either pregnant or young mothers. Through the ICAN program, some of these young women have completed their South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE), gaining accreditation for their learning in health, nutrition, budgeting and child literacy. Not only do their futures look brighter, but so too do the futures of their children. 'You don't wag here', says one of the young mums, 'I actually want to be here because you learn relevant things'.

In another example, businesses in a rural township which is increasingly becoming a popular tourist destination, worked in partnership with the local high school in re-engaging young people who had dropped out of formal learning. Many of these young people were keen to learn hospitality skills and the township was experiencing a shortage of skilled labour in the industry. However, training required a long and expensive journey to Adelaide which many of these young people could ill afford. Building a training kitchen with ICAN funding and

providing a trainer has seen a number of young people graduate into the industry or return to school to complete year 12. Miriam, who was failing year 10, says she is determined to stay on to year 12: 'I'm concentrating and getting higher grades because I'm focused now on where I want to go', she says. Of the 46 participants, 45 have successfully re-engaged in further education or training, or have moved on to successful employment outcomes.

Flexible resourcing to maximise learning

Above are just a few examples of successful ICAN trial programs. However, having demonstrated that young people can be successfully re-engaged when communities and schools work collaboratively, ICAN needed to find a way to sustainably maintain that re-engagement without drawing on specifically allocated government funding. Flexible Learning Options (FLO) is a new DECS enrolment strategy which provides ICAN secondary schools with learning resource funding options to engage and retain identified students.

Not only must all young people up to a certain age attend school by law, but young people also have a right to an education. Funding is provided by governments to schools to pay for this education. However, frequently, whilst young people want to learn and become active and valued members of society, circumstances, often beyond their control, prevent them from doing so in traditional ways, in traditional places, and with traditional teachers. Whilst ICAN has demonstrated that it is possible to successfully re-engage young people—through specialised case management, where their needs are addressed, and through meaningful learning in flexible ways and spaces—in the past, school funding had only been provided for young people to access their education in traditional ways within the confines of the school walls. Furthermore, the funding was effectively tied to the classroom teacher and could not therefore be used flexibly to provide case management or to broker external support to meet identified needs.

Flexible Learning Options allows for this funding in ICAN secondary schools: students are individually provided with specialised case management to address their identified individual barriers and, in consultation with students, based on their needs and interests, a tailored learning program is created in the form of a Flexible Learning Plan (FLP). Whilst students remain enrolled with their home school, they may still be accessing most of their learning in spaces beyond the school walls. The home school manages their program, with a minimum requirement being that the Flexible Learning Plan is used to provide learning which is aligned and can be accredited with outcomes from either the R–10 SACSA Framework or SACE for senior students. Teachers may also be utilised in a broader community learning setting to provide specifically tailored learning programs, developed to meet the needs of a small group of specific students at a specific time.

For example, young people may be enrolled at a secondary school which they attend on one afternoon each week to access literacy and numeracy tutoring in partnership with a youth agency. Another youth agency may provide an external program in life skills and anger management. In addition, the young person may be attending TAFE for a pre-vocational course which complements some structured workplace learning. All

of this can be organised within an individual Flexible Learning Plan arrangement.

Case management—the core of the issue

Aligned with a Flexible Learning Options enrolment are four models of case management which address the diverse range of student needs. Of course, early intervention makes a lot of sense so recognising when young people are at risk of early school leaving and addressing their barriers to engagement through school mentoring and an individual case management approach may prevent the necessity for more intensive support later. This is the first of the FLO individual case management models.

Each model builds progressively on the last, drawing on school-based learning as far as possible, but increasingly accessing community based programs and youth support as this is required to meet the holistic needs of young people. The final model meets the needs of chronically disengaged young people who may have significant barriers to their learning, with wellbeing, health and, possibly, juvenile justice issues. These young people are engaged entirely through off campus community based programs, and often spend extended periods of time on engagement activities before beginning to access accredited learning from local Registered Training Organisations to develop skills and work readiness. It is highly likely they will be receiving intensive case management over an extended period of time.

A brighter future

When the State Government commissioned the Social Inclusion Board in 2003 to look into school retention, only two thirds of young people who started year 7 were completing year 12 in South Australia. There is still a way to go, but 2007 school retention rates have now reached nearly 75%. Contributing to this are major reforms of the State's secondary schooling system and the high school certificate. However, the School Retention Action Plan and, within that, ICAN can also take some credit. If nothing else, ICAN has provided invaluable findings to the State on what it takes to re-engage young people: joined up approaches through case management; reframing perceptions of learning by offering flexibility through wider learning spaces; working in partnerships with local communities, businesses and agencies; and, above all, building relationships in which each young person is recognised as a respected and valued individual who is entitled to an education which provides pathways to a brighter future.

In 2007 ICAN won the South Australian of the Year award for education 'in recognition of its successful programs, community involvement and overall contribution to education, retention and training'.

More information is available at:

ICAN
www.ican.sa.edu.au
Social Inclusion Initiative
www.socialinclusion.sa.gov.au

About the Authors

Susanne Koen is a freelance writer who researches, writes and manages the ICAN newsletters and website. Phillipa Duigan manages the state wide ICAN program and policy development.

Young Carers in Education: Students with Family Caring Responsibilities

By Michael Ireland

Setting the Context

Illness and disability can affect anyone at any time regardless of family, social, religious, or political differences (Frank, 2002). Issues of chronic illness and disability (including mental illness, frail age, and drug and alcohol problems) are both prevalent social issues and family issues. These issues therefore, affect all members of the family in different ways and to varying degrees. When members of a family experience chronic health difficulties, it can generate stress for all members of the family system and can result in a number of adverse consequences, particularly for children.

In Australia approximately two million children and young people live with a parent who has either a physical or intellectual disability (Goggin & Newell, 2005), a mental illness (Maybery, Reupert, Patrick, Goodyear, & Crase, 2005), or an alcohol or drug issue (Odyssey Institute of Studies, 2004). However, this data refers exclusively to parents with a health condition and does not include young people who may be siblings to one of the 694 600 young people with a disability or chronic illness (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003).

When families experience illness or disability they must adapt and find ways of coping with the stress of having a loved one with a health condition and with the additional responsibilities that are required to maintain family functioning (Jones, 1997; Korneluk & Lee, 1998). In essence, caregiving constitutes the support and assistance family members provide each other as a routine part of family interactions and is a normative and pervasive activity. When members of a family experience health difficulties, caregiving often represents an increment in the usual support and care provided and can require substantial amounts of time and energy (Biegel & Schultz, 1999).

Over the previous two decades, research has investigated the lives and experiences of children and young people who adopt caregiving responsibilities. This research has identified a number of both positive and negative outcomes for young people with adverse effects on education being the most frequently cited (Carers Australia, 2002a). However, young carers in Queensland are currently not explicitly targeted in formal student support services.

Young Carers and their Roles

Research demonstrates that when family members live with a chronic illness or disability they often rely on children for immediate, flexible, and continuous care and support (Aldridge, Becker, & Dearden, 2002). These young people have been referred to as 'young carers' (Aldridge & Becker, 1993b) Young caregiving can occur across a broad age range and so the age limit in this definition is purposely inclusive. While research has identified young carers as young as pre-school age (Becker, Aldridge, & Dearden, 1998; Gates & Lackey, 1998; Lackey & Gates, 1997), the average age of young carers is

approximately 12 or 13 years (Carers Australia, 2002b).

In Australia the number of children and young people adopting these roles has been documented at approximately 347 700 (Access Economics, 2005; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). This figure, however, is a significant underestimate due to the invisible nature of young caregiving. Fundamentally, young carers seldom recognise or identify with the label 'Young Carer' (Stables & Smith, 1999). All the literature available on young carers refers to the fact that they are very much an unseen group within society (Banks et al., 2002; Carers Australia, 2002a, 2002b; Pakenham, Bursnall, Chiu, Cannon, & Okachi, 2006).

Young Carers and Education

Adverse consequences on education is one of the most frequently cited impacts of caring on young people (Carers Australia, 2002a). Nevertheless, schools are the only formal institution to have regular contact with young people and therefore, possess the greatest capacity to provide non-invasive and ongoing support to students with family caregiving responsibilities (Nankervis, 2005).

Over the past ten years, a number of researchers have looked into the experiences of young carers in education. Both qualitative and quantitative research has been conducted in the UK, USA, and Australia to understand the effects family illness and family

Key Educational Difficulties Identified Through UK Research on Young Carers

Absence	1. May be regular, protracted or occasional. 2. May result in referral to educational welfare services.
Lateness	• May be persistent or occasional.
Tiredness	• May be identified by lack of concentration, lack of attention, falling asleep.
Difficulty joining extra curricular activities	• Due to time constraints as a result of caring.
Bullying	• May be a direct result of caring/family disability but may be unrelated. 71% of young carers questioned had experienced bullying at school (Princess Royal Trust for Carers, 1999 as cited in Frank, 2002).
Restricted peer networks in school	• May have little in common with same age peers, may be mature beyond their years, may be a result of time constraints due to caring.
Poor attainment	• May be reflected in lack of qualifications, low grade qualifications or under-performance.
Homework / coursework	• May be poor quality, not submitted on time or at all. • This may be persistent or occasional.
Anxiety and worry	• Concern over ill/disabled relative. • Lack of information about illness/disability.
Behavioural problems	• May result in referral to educational psychologist or child and adolescent psychiatrist (sourced from Moore, Morrow, McArthur, Noble-Carr, & Gray, 2005).

caregiving can have on young people's educational engagement and outcomes (Becker, 2007).

In 2002, Dearden and Becker conducted a meta-analysis in the UK of existing research into young carers and education (Dearden & Becker, 2002). They found that while not all young carers reported difficulties in education many did (from approximately a third (Banks et al., 2002; Halpenny & Gilligan, 2004) to 70% (J. Frank, Tatum, & Tucker, 1999).

Specific Problems Identified in Research

Research from Overseas

Research in the UK has found young carers are at risk of a number of negative effects on their education (Aldridge & Becker, 1993a, 1993b). The meta-analysis conducted by Dearden and Becker in 2002 identified the following list of educational difficulties experienced by young carers (these findings were closely replicated by Moore and colleagues (2005) with Australian students).

Additionally, data from qualitative interviews with young carers offers a number of insights into how the daily concerns and domestic pressures (Banks et al., 2001) of young caregiving present as barriers to optimal educational engagement and outcomes. At the outset, children have reported that constant worry and anxiety for the ill or disabled relative is an ongoing barrier to optimal concentration (Dearden & Becker, 1995). Additionally, in a UK national survey, the majority of young carers that had missed school identified a number of factors directly related to their caregiving roles (e.g., a reluctance leaving ill parents alone) (Dearden & Becker, 2000a). In some more extreme cases, young carers' absence is related to the safety of care-recipients (as in the case of self-harming or suicidal relatives and/or those with mental illness or a drug and alcohol problem) (Aldridge & Becker, 2003). Furthermore, when young carers do attend school many report feeling stigmatised and isolated (Underdown, 2002).

Research from the US also found that alongside family life and time with friends, school was the most likely area to be affected by family caregiving responsibilities (Lackey & Gates, 2001). Research identified a pronounced effect on young carers' school life and found a number of young people dropped out of school as a result of caregiving responsibilities (Lackey & Gates, 2001). Siskowski (2006) found that 67% of young carers in a student sample missed school and after-school activities, had difficulty completing homework and were interrupted in their studying. This research also found that support for young carers in school and the community can improve education outcomes.

Research from Australia

In 2002, Carers Australia commissioned a report to draw together all the available research on young carers. This project discovered that young caregiving was widespread in Australia and that the impacts of providing care without support were often significant and long lasting (Moore et al., 2005).

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics demonstrates that only 4% of young primary carers aged 15-25yrs are still at school (compared to 23% of the general population in this age group) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999). These figures are significant and clearly demonstrate the importance of schools

responding appropriately to the legitimate and pressing needs of young carers. In addition, educational research in Australia demonstrates that family problems including children's caring are the major reasons for poor school attendance in Australian schools (Marsh, 2000; Moore et al., 2005).

It is not surprising then, that Australian young carers have identified support in schools as one of their key areas of need (Kroehn & Wheldrake, 2006).

Young Carers Value Their Education

Poor retention rates for students with family caregiving responsibilities are not an indicator that they do not value school or their education. In fact, young carers often highly regard their education and work hard to achieve. Thomas and colleagues noted,

> We were struck by the conscientiousness attitude to school and homework taken by many of the young people interviewed .There was a high level of awareness of the importance of doing well at school. Truancy was not an issue; they wanted to go to school, and seemed genuinely concerned when they had to be absent or were unable do their work (Thomas et al., 2003 p. 40).

Young carers have reported that school is particularly important for them because it,

1. Offers respite from their home lives (providing a safe haven and stability);
2. Provides them with opportunities to connect with other young people (particularly those in a similar situation to themselves) and to develop a sense of belonging (this is particularly important as social support has been found to be the strongest predictor of psychosocial functioning in young carers (Pakenham, Chiu, Bursnall, & Cannon, 2007));
3. Is a place where they can receive support and information from people who are understanding and caring;
4. Provides opportunities to learn and to experience new things (adapted from Moore et al., 2005); and
5. Is a pathway to future work opportunities as well as positive psychosocial development (Nankervis, 2005).

Why Retention is Poor[1]

Because school communities are not aware of or understand and value young people's caring roles, young people report experiencing ridicule, disbelief, inflexibility and labelling by school staff and peers. When young carers experience chronic misunderstanding and a lack of support they are most at risk of discontinuing their studies (Nankervis, 2005).

The decision to leave school for many young carers is a result of factors out of their control and often is the only option they perceive (Carers Australia, 2002b). Young carers assert that when they experience problems with attendance it is because of,

1. The level of caring responsibility they assumed,
2. The lack of formal and informal services available to support them and their relative,
3. Family issues such as poverty and isolation (adapted from Moore et al., 2005), and

[1] Another issue affecting retention is the stringent conditions on accessing Centrelink's Carers Payment. Carers have to be involved in less than 20 hours of study or work. Therefore, for young carers to access much needed financial support many are forced to consider sacrificing their education.

1. Education systems that lack understanding and flexibility (Kroehn & Wheldrake, 2006).

Interestingly, research has found that even when young carers have disengaged from formal education some may wish to return (Thomas et al., 2003).

Providing Solutions

Poor educational outcomes experienced by students with family caregiving responsibilities represent an inequality in opportunities for these young people and a form of social injustice, which needs to be questioned and challenged by the learning community.

Overcoming this inequality will require an identification and reduction of the many barriers to learning that are experienced by young carers. One way to do this is for all school staff and students to understand and value diversity and families that experience illness or disability and family caregiving.

Education Queensland's current emphasis on inclusive education and student support provides an ideal framework through which young carers could be recognised and supported without drawing unnecessary attention to individual caregiving or family situations.

A number of initiatives that have been introduced in schools (mostly in the UK) like homework clubs, homework telephone links, and mentoring systems (Banks et al., 2002) would greatly benefit young carers in Australia. In addition, mainstream student support policies and services implemented to support young people and maximise retention (such as flexible delivery, fee exemption, counselling, tutoring, etc.) would afford young carers much-needed support and therefore, maximise educational engagement and outcomes.

Importantly, however, research indicates that young carers generally do not engage with services that are not explicitly targeted at them[1] (Nankervis, 2005). Thus, optimal support for young carers involves both the extension and specific targeting of existing student support services and the introduction of tailored services.

Understanding and support for young carers in education must be based on the messages and voices of young people themselves. To this end, young carers have consistently and clearly communicated the need for, "improved communication; a desire to be listened to, believed and understood; and to be recognised and valued." (Butler & Astbury, 2005 p. 298) Many young carers report that not being taken seriously enough is one of the major barriers to accessing the kinds of support they require (Roche & Tucker, 2003).

Fundamental to meeting these needs is greater awareness and appreciation for family illness, disability, and caregiving among members of the school community (including teachers, guidance officers and counselling staff, administration staff, and the student population) (Underdown, 2002). Without this, young carers report an ongoing lack of understanding from the school community regarding their needs and circumstances (Halpenny & Gilligan, 2004) and consequently experience stigma and isolation (young carers have even been labelled 'problem-children'). As one young carer put it,

1 The issue of targeting is further complicated in that young carers do not identify with the label young carer. Services should instead be target more broadly at students who live in and help support family members that experience illness and disability. The extent to which services are flexible in how they target and support young carers will, to a large extent, determine their success.

> School would have been made easier if the teachers were made aware of my personal plight and they had more of an understanding of why I was tired or why I was aggressive (Bursnall, Pakenham, Cannon, & Murphy, Forthcoming).

Unfortunately, many young carers think, 'Teachers don't know about young carers.' 'Teachers don't care.' (Butler & Astbury, 2005 p. 298) The majority of young carers in recent research reported negative outcomes from self-identifying to teachers, including the loss of anonymity, receiving inappropriate responses, disbelief and breaches of confidentiality (Moore et al., 2005).

Fundamentally, awareness and understanding are critical elements for supporting young people who are carers. Many researchers and practitioners believe,

> Until a way is found of enabling young people to feel comfortable about discussing their caring role, services provided to support young carers will only touch the tip of the iceberg. (Banks et al., 2002 p. 230)

Therefore, support for young carers must be built on strategies to increase the awareness and understanding of the whole school community.

Approaches to Supporting Young Carers

A report by the Youth Coalition of the ACT (taken from Moore, 2005) identified the following broad approaches to supporting young carers:

- Training of teachers, counsellors, and youth support workers in school and the broader community so that young carers were provided with the understanding support and appropriate responses, thus enabling them to attend and achieve in their schooling.
- More flexible and responsive education that recognised the difficulties that young carers face when trying to attend and achieve in school (Kroehn & Wheldrake, 2006).

The Nature of Support Services

To ensure the utility and efficacy of support services, these services must be,

- **Flexible**: to respond to the considerable variance both within (across time) and between caregiving situations.
- **Non-invasive**: it needs to be appreciated that some young carers will value their privacy and not want to be identified or supported. Ultimately schools need to protect the privacy of young carers and avoid being intrusive in providing support (schools must leave it to young people to initiate support and respect their right not to).
- **Confidential**: disability, illness, and caregiving are sensitive issues and the privacy and dignity of the family and young person must be protected. The right not to have people know about their situation must also be protected. Trust is critical to identifying and supporting young carers.
- **Easily accessible**: young people often face many barriers to accessing support services due to time, money, or transport issues. Support services need to be sensitive to these issues and have strategies in place for overcoming them.
- **Inclusive**: services need to have flexibility and openness in how they define their target group (young carers are not a homogeneous group). Services must also be inclusive of the views of young people themselves and involve them in the development,

implementation and assessment of any support.

- **Adequately promoted**: many families do not access support because they do not know it exists. Support options must be advertised to young people in (multiple and child-friendly) ways that is understandable and non-threatening to them. Information needs to provide positive images of disability and family caring and be appealing, simple, readable, and easily seen (on school noticeboards, newsletters, etc.)
- **Holistic**: an approach which works towards recognising and supporting both the care giver and the ill or disabled person, recognising family strengths as well as any difficulties and being careful not to undermine parenting skills.

Barriers To Implementation and Strategies

While the provision of support services has been found to dramatically improve outcomes for young carers, there are a number of barriers that restrict access and optimal engagement (Carers Australia, 2002b).

Identification

In order for formal support services to make an impact on young carers and their educational outcomes, school communities need to be able to identify and connect with young carers. Identification presents a critical and unique challenge to supporting young carers. Nevertheless, school is the best place to identify young people with caregiving responsibilities (Kroehn & Wheldrake, 2006).

Critically, Moore and colleagues (Moore et al., 2005) found,

> Young carers in this project felt that until schools could counter the negative consequences such as bullying and peer rejection and provide them with useful and concrete supports, they would not feel comfortable in people knowing about their home lives. (p. 58)

As Banks and colleagues (2002) point out, "the reluctance of young people to be identified is deeply entrenched, and that any form of support that singles them out may be of limited value" (p. 243). Young carers might not know who to confide in or even feel able to. Young carers might be embarrassed about their home situation or they may not want to appear different and increase the risk of social isolation and bullying (Frank, 2002).

Students with caring responsibilities do not refer to themselves as young carers nor do their families view them that way (Morrow, 2005; Nankervis, 2005). Some young carers do not recognise the effect their responsibilities have on their educational or psychosocial outcomes. One strategy might be to discard the title 'young carer' and instead refer to these youngsters as 'students with family caregiving responsibilities". Ultimately, it is critical that "identification of students should only occur after schools have developed a series of strategies and policies to address their needs." (p. 59)

One solution to the problem of identification is to look beyond traditional centre-based approaches. One way of doing this is to utilise advances in information and communication technologies to provide a series of non-invasive and flexible web-based (and telephone/mobile) information/resources and counselling services.

Information for young carers needs to include the effects and needs of young carers, the services and support that are available, and information on illness and disability conditions and treatments. Additionally, this information needs to be tailored for different age and developmental stages.

Another possible solution is to include information and questions on school admission forms that allow families to identify that a member has a long-term illness or disability (including mental illness, drug and alcohol problem or frail age). If this strategy is adopted procedures must be in place for communicating and enforcing the confidentiality of the family.

Access

Many young carers will not be aware of the services that are available to them (or in many cases know that they are young carers).

Services need to be advertised in a way that will attract the attention of young people and indicates what kind of help can be provided. Information needs to be presented in ways that young people will notice, see and read. This information must be simple and specific on what a young carer is and the exact services that can be provided and exactly how and where to access them.

References

Access Economics. (2005). The Economic Value of Informal Care: Carers Australia.

Aldridge, J., & Becker, D. (2003). Children Caring for Parents with Mental Illness: Perspectives of Young Carers, Parents and Professionals. Bristol: Policy Press.

Aldridge, J., & Becker, S. (1993a). Punishing children for caring: the hidden cost of young carers. Children and Society, 7, 376-387.

Aldridge, J., & Becker, S. (1993b). Children Who Care: Inside the World of Young Carers. Retrieved 1/2/2007.

Aldridge, J., Becker, S., & Dearden, C. (2002). Children Caring for Parents with Severe and Enduring Mental illness. Evidence, 5, 1-4.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (1999). Disability, Ageing and Carers: Summary of Findings. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2003). Disability, Ageing and Carers: A Summary of Findings. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Banks, P., Coogan, N., Deeley, S., Hill, M., Roche, J., & Tisdall, K. (2001). Seeing the invisibility: Children and young people affected by disability. Disability and Society, 16(6), 797-814.

Banks, P., Coogan, N., Riddell, S., Deeley, S., Hill, M., & Tisdall, K. (2002). Does the covert nature of caring prohibit the development of effective services for young carers. British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, 30, 229-246.

Becker, S. (2007). Global perspectives on children's unpaid caregiving in the family: Research and policy on 'young carers' in the UK, Australia, the USA and Sub-Saharan Africa. Global Social Policy, 7(1), 23-50.

Becker, S., Aldridge, J., & Dearden, C. (1998). Young Carers and Their Families. Oxford: Blackwell Science.

Biegel, D. E., & Schultz, R. (1999). Caregiving and caregiver interactions in ageing and mental illness. Family Relations, 48(4), 345-354.

Bursnall, S., Pakenham, K. I., Cannon, T., & Murphy, P. (Forthcoming). Understanding the experiences and needs of young people whose parent has an illness or disability. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Butler, A. H., & Astbury, G. (2005). The Caring Child: An Evaluative Case Study of the Cornwall Young Carers Project. Retrieved 28/9/2007, 2007.

Carers Australia. (2002a). Young Carers Research Report: Background Papers. Canberra: Carers Australia.

Carers Australia. (2002b). Young Carers Research Project: Final Report. Canberra: Carers Australia.

Dearden, C., & Becker, S. (1995). Young Carers: The Facts. Sutton: Reed Business Publishing/Community Care.

Dearden, C., & Becker, S. (2000a). Growing Up Caring: Vulnerability and Transition to Adulthood - Young Carers' Experiences. Leicester: Youth Work Press.

Dearden, C., & Becker, S. (2002). Young Carers and Education. London: Carers UK.

Frank, J. (2002). Making it Work: Good Practice with Young Carers and Families. London: The Princess Royal Trust for Carers & The Children's Society.

Frank, J., Tatum, C., & Tucker, S. (1999). On Small Shoulders: Learning from the Experiences of Young Carers. London: The Children's Society.

Gates, M., & Lackey, N. (1998). Youngsters caring for adults with cancer. The Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 30(1), 11-15.

Goggin, G., & Newell, C. (2005). Disability in Australia: Exposing a Social Apartheid. Sydney: UNSW Press.

Halpenny, A., & Gilligan, R. (2004). Caring before their time? Research and policy perspectives on young carers. Dublin: The National Children's Resource Centre Barnardos.

Jones, S. (1997). Caregiver burden: The experience of parents, children, siblings, and spouses of people with mental illness. Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 20(4), 84.

Korneluk, Y. G., & Lee, C. M. (1998). Children's Adjustment to Parental Physical Illness. Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 1(3), 179-193.

Kroehn, A., & Wheldrake, K. (2006). A Current Perspective: What Services and Young People say About Best Practice and Gaps for Young Carers in Australia. Canberra: The Australian National Youth Roundtable.

Lackey, N. R., & Gates, M. F. (1997). Combining the ablayses of three qualitative data sets in studying young caregivers. Journal of Advanced Nursing, 26, 664-671.

Lackey, N. R., & Gates, M. F. (2001). Adults' recollections of their experiences as young caregivers of family members with chronic physical illnesses. Journal of Advanced Nursing, 34(3), 320-328.

Marsh, P. (2000). Truency or abseenteeism? A school governance perspective. Queensland Journal of Educational Research, 1004(16).

Maybery, D., Reupert, A., Patrick, K., Goodyear, M., & Crase, L. (2005). VicHealth Research Report on Children at Risk in Families affected by Parental Mental Illness. Melbourne: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

Moore, T. (2005). More than Words: Supporting Young Carers and Their Families. Canberra: Youth Coalition of the ACT.

Moore, T., Morrow, R., McArthur, M., Noble-Carr, D., & Gray, J. (2005). Reading, Writing, and Responsibility: Young Carers and Education. Canberra: Institute of Child Protection: Australian Catholic University.

Morrow, R. (2005). A Profile of Known Young Carers and Identification and Snapshot of the Ones who are Hidden. Perth: Curtin University of Technology.

Nankervis, J. (2005). Time out for Studies and Life: A Practical Guide and Worker Resource for The Young Carers at risk Respite Program. Victoria: Victoria Carer Services Network.

Odyssey Institute of Studies. (2004). The Nobody's Clients Project: Identifying and Addressing the Needs of Children with Substance Dependent Parents. Victoria: Odyssey Institute of Studies.

Pakenham, K., Bursnall, S., Chiu, J., Cannon, T., & Okachi, M. (2006). The psychosocial impact of caregiving on young people who have a parent with an illness or disability: Comparisons between young caregivers and noncaregivers. Rehabilitation Psychology, 51(2), 113-126.

Pakenham, K., Chiu, J., Bursnall, S., & Cannon, T. (2007). Relations between social support, Appraisal and coping and both positive and negative outcomes in young carers. Journal of Health Psychology, 12(1), 89-102.

Roche, J., & Tucker, S. (2003). Extending the social exclusion debate: An exploration of

the family lives of young carers and young people with ME. Childhood, 10(4), 439-456.

Siskowski, C. (2006). Young caregivers: Effects of family health situations on school performance. The Journal of School Nursing, 22(3), 163-170.

Stables, J., & Smith, F. (1999). 'Caught in the Cinderella trap': Narratives of disabled parents and young carers. In R. Butler & H. Parr (Eds.), Mind and Body Spaces: Geographies of Illness, Impairment and Disability (pp. 257-268). London: Routledge.

Thomas, N., Stainton, T., Jackson, S., Chueng, W., Doubtfire, S., & Webb, A. (2003). "Your friends don't understand": Invisibility and unmet need in the lives of young carers. Child and Family Social Work, 8(35-46).

Underdown, A. (2002). 'I'm growing up too fast': Messages from young carers. Children and Society, 16, 57-60.

About the Author

Michael Ireland is presently a post-graduate researcher with the University of Queensland. Michael has spent the past few years working with the Queensland Council of Carers, specifically supporting young carers through research, policy, and service development.

From disengaged to re-engaged: The Alternative Schooling Option

By Peter Roguszka

Introduction: Why do young people become disengaged?

The notion of disengagement is fascinating in that it has specific meaning for specific groups of people who are likely to use the term, a term that will neve be used by those individuals it seeks to describe. The users of the term are those who have to deal with the wide ranging consequences of that disengagement. Various groups of these work or operate in differing sectors of the broader social services spectrum with each group defining disengagement in the context of the work of its own agency. Young people, as a consequence, may be described as being disengaged from family, work, education or a plethora of other aspects of life that we, the keepers of important knowledge, know are vital to successful participation in life.

One of the most common results of this fractured response to young people facing major challenges is that the focus of the attempts at remediation is on sub-sets of the total cause rather than the cause itself. There is a vital question that is too frequently left unanswered: why is this young person disengaged? This is vital due to an important need among those working with disengaged youth not to replicate the cause of disengagement in attempting to deal with it.

Port School, a small independent school in Fremantle, Western Australia, has come to specialise in working with disengaged teenagers who are having difficulties in coping with mainstream schooling. The Commonwealth Government recently asked us to produce descriptors of the reasons for disengagement among our students: we provided 19! The reality is that many of these are simply different responses to the same causal factor. These causal factors, we have found, are: personal abuse of all kinds, frequently as a young child; being bullied; acrimonious family break-up; parental drug/substance abuse, mental illness and learning disabilities.

Our experience suggests that there is a common thread in the presentation and severity of disengagement: there is a significant correlation with problems or dysfunction within their own families or carers' homes. It is valuable to consider the role of parents and family when discussing a child's dysfunction as our experience shows us that very often what we are dealing with are the problems of the parents reflected in the behaviour of the child.

The Possibility of Explanation

The ways in which responsible adults respond to the child or young person very frequently predict the ways in which any disengagement develops. As each child enrolled at Port School is disengaged to some degree the cohort represents a valuable sample for some degree of phenomenological research. Port School staff members have a very good understanding of the ways in which disengagement manifests and the life experiences that contribute to it. This experience shows us how the behaviours of significant adults in the child's life

affect that child. In discussing this phenomenon it must be remembered that the comments made concern typical causal relationships and that there will always be exceptions to the most common outcomes.

The way in which disengagement presents is most likely to reflect the experience of other people's behaviour that the child most frequently experiences. To illustrate this it is valuable to consider two different types of disengagement. We have experience of two students who have suffered sexual abuse at an early age. One displays extreme levels of disengagement with frequent aggressive and angry outbursts. The other presents with very few indicators of disengagement (however, this would change very quickly away from the carefully created supportive environment of the school). The only identifiable difference between the two is the ways in which the respective carers respond to problematic behaviour. In the case of the former relationships at home are verbally abusive with anger and threat being used to control behaviour. The second student's family are supportive and loving in spite of enormous social and intellectual barriers to their ability to achieve this.

It takes far more than these two examples of the range of disengaged behaviours to even suggest there is a common thread operating. I have used these, merely as examples to illustrate what we have observed in hundreds of adolescents over the last five years. It is these observations that lead to a belief that the nature of family or carer relations have a significant impact on the way in which disengagement manifests. Unfortunately, having this information does not help to avoid disengagement. Rather it helps workers in the field to understand its causes. In turn this has no value unless this understanding can be applied to the problem to advise strategies that can help address the problems and disadvantages caused by behaviours associated with disengagement.

Dealing With Disengagement at School

If we accept these causes of behaviours associated with disengagement it becomes necessary to attempt to identify the social situations in the young person's life that are similar to negative family behaviours that exacerbate the responses he or she makes. Unfortunately, the one place at which all young people are expected to spend a very large proportion of their lives inevitably replicates many of the dysfunctional factors that elicit the negative behaviours.

Because schools, in the main, are designed to work on an economy of scale and consequently bring large numbers of young people together there is a pressing need to initiate procedures of control. Without control, bringing hundreds of adolescents together at the same time would be almost certain to very rapidly lead to a state of aggressive anarchy. It is not by accident that Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) strikes a strong chord with young and old alike. The procedures of control inevitably lead to a certain degree of conflict: "Don't run!" when an energy filled adolescent wants to let off steam, "Don't push!" when he is eager to arrive, "Don't dawdle!" when he wants to avoid the destination. These simple and mostly innocuous controls create a little resentment and consequent defiance and it is this that generates the serious conflict. It is worth considering that conflict perfectly describes the

defining aspect of communication sofrequently seen in the disengaged youth's family and social life.

We can deduce from this that a mainstream school with its large size and lists of rules could not be better designed to stimulate aggressive responses in disengaged young people. Having reached this conclusion how can we respond? Almost every developed nation requires young people to participate in education. For the vast majority the only way this can be done is through attendance at a school. In addition there is a range of research data that tell us that the longer young people stay at school the better their subsequent life-chances. For these reasons merely opting out is not acceptable and if this option is taken research also tells us that life-chances will be further compromised (see Marginson 1993).

The only possibility is an alternative type of school for disengaged youth, one that actively seeks to identify and eliminate the points of conflict that most schools see as being desirable, if not essential. Port School is such an institution, enrolling students referred by the Department of Child Protection, Juvenile Justice, District Education Office's attendance and student services sections, high school principals and parents coming to their wits end trying to find a school their child can cope with.

As the majority of enrolling students have a history of achieving very little success in education, the school's core belief is that everyone is good at at least one thing. The school must identify this one thing and encourage the success that is gained from it with the intention of developing the success to encompass other areas of the school curriculum. Clearly, this is not an adequate basis on which to run a school for students at risk but it does provide a guide to making decisions about the other procedures that have to be implemented to allow the school to work.

Most conflict in schools occurs between staff and students when there is a requirement to modify behaviour, whether this behaviour relates to simply sitting quietly and getting on with a learning task or not punching another student. Almost every aspect of working with young people in a school involves the expectation of a change of behaviour. In the vast majority of these cases there is no problem as this is a normal part of daily social behaviour. However, the disengaged child has a much lower tolerance to what he or she would see as "being told what to do" and even simple requests can quickly develop into extreme conflict situations. As not asking students to do or not do things is not an option in a school another strategy to avoid this situation arising has to be found. The most effective way we have found lies in a strategy that is repeatedly espoused in behaviour management texts: building positive relationships. Unfortunately, this is nigh on impossible in mainstream schools due simply to the pressure of numbers: it is not possible to develop positive relationships with the 100 to 180 adolescents that most high school teachers work with each week. With disengaged young people all the adults that work with them must have a positive relationship with them. The only way this can be achieved is in a small school: 50 students maximum, with small classes: less than ten students but preferable half that number.

If this can be achieved a much greater level of success is attainable but there are simple things that experience shows improves the chances even more:

- removing institutionalised points of conflict (school rules) such as uniforms, arbitrary rules eg. no hats in class, hierarchical forms of address, eg. Sir or Miss when students are called by their first name;
- giving and expecting respect
- reducing school hours (ask a high school teacher with disengaged students how effective the last lesson in the day is!);
- providing breakfast

While simple sounding, every one of these become more difficult as the size of the school increases. The implication of this is that education departments need to make special provision for disengaged young people as the schools they provide (at least here in Western Australia) can not successfully provide for their educational needs.

On a per capita basis the cost of the government sector doing this would be in the region of four to six times that of educating an "average" student and consequently is unlikely to followed through in a committed way. However, there is an alternative: small independent specialist schools that gain additional funding from government, not only in recognition of the educational value but also the savings to other agencies who become less likely to deal with these young people when they have reached the point of being unable to continue attending school. Research in the UK suggests that the cost to society of one adolescent not attending school is £64,000 ($142,000) for a range of government department services, insurance and repairs and maintenance (Brrokes, Goodall & Heady2007). Even a small fraction of the savings a small specialist school for disengaged young people could generate would fund that school more than adequately.

Conclusion

Disengagement in young people has enormous costs attendant upon it, for the individual, for friends and family, for government departments and for the wider community. With an understanding of the causes of this disengagement, action can be taken to address the problem as the knowledge of what action is both feasible and effective exists in some sectors of the education community.

As with so many aspects of working with deeply set and difficult problems faced by individuals effective action is both contentious and expensive. The benefit for the individual of effectively addressing the problem should, in itself, be sufficient justification for committing to the expenditure. When savings to the wider community can be demonstrated it becomes clear the cost of not taking action puts an imposition on society that should not be countenanced. Sadly, for reasons that may include prejudice against young people who do not present as "nice" and compliant there is little commitment from governments and community leaders to make a start.

Port School is one of a handful across the country that has worked in this climate of indifference and even hostility to try to make a difference for a small number of disengaged young people. The degree of success being achieved is what makes it worth carrying on. The time must, surely, be approaching when the value of what these schools are doing is recognised and their management will be able to concentrate on making the schools even better rather than frantically negotiating with bureaucrats to maintain sufficient funding to remain open.

References

Brookes, M, Goodall, E & Heady L (2007), *Misspent Youth: the cost of truancy and exclusion,* New Philanthropy Capital, London.

Golding, W. (1954), *The Lord of the flies*, Faber & Faber, London.

Marginson, S (1993), *Educational Credentials in Australia: Average Positional Value in Decline*, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

About the Author

Dr Peter Roguszka has been principal of Port School for five years. Prior to that he worked in various teaching roles in government schools in WA, NT and the UK.

Port School is a small independent school specialising in working with "at risk" adolescents. Over the years programs have been developed that have proven to be very effective with many students successfully transitioning into work or further education

Micro savings

Independent Students and Economic Disadvantage as a barrier to participation in education

By Renee Mills

Introduction

Community Connections is a community organisation working with young people at risk of early home and/or school leaving. The agency has been engaging with Independent Students in local schools across Brisbane North since 2000, supporting them to either reengage or maintain engagement in education, by providing individual support, facilitating peer support groups, providing advocacy and lobbying, and undertaking project work that has arisen from these groups. This work resulted from the observation that many young people disengage from education once they become independent, due to the lack of support to address social, emotional, economic and practical issues. This paper will outline the collaboration between Community Connections, independent students and a group of young women reengaging in education to both address discrimination based on economic disadvantage and utilise a Microfinance model as a means to develop skills that financially support (re) engagement in education.

Initial Project

The Independent Students Project arose through collaboration between a group of independent students and Community Connections. Students produced a DVD to raise awareness of their experiences, and to assist other independent students with information and increase support. A clear message from the students experience was their daily struggle to support themselves financially, including meeting the costs of education and achieving their educational and personal goals due to economic disadvantage. Upon viewing this short film, independent students from another school also decided to meet together as a group to share their stories and find solutions for the financial challenges they faced. This second group identified that they each faced personal and emotional issues which interfered with education, but were currently accessing support to address these issues. Their primary concern was the challenge of living independently, meeting the costs of education and juggling the impact of financial needs with their commitment to complete their schooling. Consequently, the journey began to explore ways of addressing their economic disadvantage and Microfinance as a means to support young people's engagement in education.

The issues identified by students as impacting on their education were:

1. Family conflict.
2. Caring for a parent with mental health issues and their younger siblings (while living independently).
3. Mental health issues of the young person.

4. Lack of family support
5. Pregnancy and parenting
6. Health issues
7. Accessing affordable accommodation
8. Juggling managing a household (shopping, cooking cleaning) additional to their school commitments
9. 'Living on little' and budgeting
10. Work commitments
11. Access to health services

The young people further identified that schooling requires a financial commitment which competes with their need to prioritize housing, utility bills, transport, and food. Educational costs included:

- text book hire scheme,
- uniforms,
- stationery,
- camps,
- excursions,
- transport,
- photocopying costs,
- home Internet access,
- art levies,
- Home Economics materials (food and material),
- Senior Jerseys and
- participation in school events, which they saw as important to be included in the school community (school dances, formals).

Students reported varying consequences, of not meeting these payments across school communities, but they included:

- the inability to participate in excursions they were advised to be 'compulsory' for completing subjects,
- the with holding of end of year reports and student identification cards, and
- not being allowed to attend their Senior Formal.

One young person was held accountable for a previous debt for non payment of school fees which was incurred whilst they were living within their family unit. In reporting these consequences it became clear that students were being discriminated against due to economic hardship beyond their control.

Support Provided

On reflections of the young people's experience, it is important to note that each school community is just that, a community. Each school responds to the needs of independent students in different ways and many schools are open to negotiation when approached regarding these issues. However, identifying these differences in individual school practice necessitated a multilayered response to ensure the issue of discrimination of students due to economic disadvantage was addressed across the Education System. Therefore, Community Connections engaged Queensland Youth Housing Coalition to lobby Education Queensland to resolve policies issues regarding the support and assessment of independent students.

As a result of this system advocacy, Education Queensland policy now states:

> "Students who are at risk of disengaging from learning (e.g. independent students) and students of parents experiencing financial hardship, should not be disadvantaged through the imposition of school fees. Schools are to take this into consideration when developing their policies on fee waivers.
>
> Students are not to be disadvantaged through not providing student ID cards

as this restricts access to learning i.e. subsidised transport and the school library (depending on school practices).

Actions to collect school fees that have not been paid should not be seen as punishment or as a behaviour management tool." (http://education.qld.gov.au/strategic/eppr/finance/fnmpr019/)

Alongside this work to encourage systemic change, Community Connections also offered support to individual independent students, advocating for their rights to access education, negotiating agreements with their school communities and working to address other social and emotional barriers to their participation in education What's more, peer support offered in the group setting provided an opportunity for students to link with each other, easily access referral and information from a youth and family worker and to raise awareness within the school community of their experiences.

Box 1: Resources Required

Financial contribution by Community Connections and young people.	The most appropriate model was a matching scheme; for each dollar saved by students for education related expenses Community Connections matches up to $250 for each participant per year. The 'matching' model was selected as the most appropriate for independent students, given their limited resources and provided an incentive for students to participate in the group, which lead to developing new skills and receiving financial and personal support.
Nutritious lunch	Provided by Community Connections for students attending the weekly meetings.
Staff to facilitate the group	Two Community Connections employees assists the independent students manage the micro savings and provide personal support, information and referral.
Workers from the school and/or other organisations	Attended meetings when students identified they required information on a specific issue. For example, the Guidance Officer attended to provide information on University Entrance schemes for students who are economically disadvantaged.
Additonal resources	Provided at group meetings when required including information on budgeting, recipes, budget pantry guides, and university and TAFE entrance/fee information.

The Micro Savings Model

Extending the community development process used by Community Connections in this project, the development of the Micro Savings model, recognizes that education comes with a cost independent students can not always afford. The Micro Savings Model provides an avenue and support for students to develop financial literacy skills required to sustain engagement in education.

The objectives of the Micro Savings Project are as follows:

1. To address the economic disadvantage experienced by independent students;
2. To provide an opportunity for independent students to develop savings and budgeting skills; and
3. To support independent students who are experiencing economic disadvantage to remain engaged in education.

Box 1 (left) details the resources required for the model.

Outcomes

Six young people completing their Senior year of schooling, were involved in the formation of the group and the development of the model. During this stage, two students had their enrolment cancelled due to a 'lack of participation' (poor attendance and/or poor academic performance). Health issues,

caring responsibilities, family conflict and homelessness contributed to difficulties in attendance and participation. These students worked with Community Connections to advocate for their right to stay in school, to address the issues impacting on their ability to reengage in education and to seek alternative education options. One student completed Senior schooling at another high school and the other chose to move into a full time traineeship. As a result of this, and the needs of students attending other local schools, Community Connections explored the possibility of bringing students together from across North Brisbane to participate in the Micro Savings project . Through these discussions it became clear that holding the group during school hours (morning tea) and on the school grounds was essential to the success of the group. Should the group have been held outside of school, students said they would not be able to participate given their competing commitments of work, home, caring and school responsibilities.

Four young people participated in the savings phase and all of these students completed their Senior phase of learning. Of the four students, three met and saved regularly, reaching the maximum matched amount of $250. The fourth student attended sporadically and saved $160. The students used their savings, and the amount matched by Community Connections for Text Book Hire Scheme, uniforms, excursions, Home Economic costs, formal tickets, TAFE fees, QTAC application fees and stationery.

Students feedback regarding the project is as follows:

- All participants commented that the Micro Savings Project was 'fantastic' as it helped them to save money. One young person commented that the matching scheme 'is free money – you'd be stupid not to do it!'
- One student stated that 'it was good to save because otherwise it gets sucked up by other living expenses'. The other members of the group agreed.
- Students said they enjoyed coming together and sharing food.
- Two students said they were able to attend their formal because of their participation in Micro Savings, as they were able to pay off fees, and buy formal tickets and clothing. (Attendance was prohibited by the school if any money was owing to the school).
- One young man commented he felt it was good to know he could come to the meeting and there would be food, because sometimes he wouldn't have food at home. He said eating lunch helped him to get through the day.
- The young person who attended less group meetings said that it was due to school commitments; morning tea and lunch times were often taken up with tracking down teachers and finishing off school work. He said he enjoyed coming to the group because he felt comfortable with the other students and workers. He also stated that it was good to know the group was there – because it made it easier to talk to a worker about 'stuff'.
- The student that saved less and more erratically, stated it was due to both his inability to come to all group meetings and because he was couch surfing his costs would change significantly each fortnight. Therefore, he could not follow a regular budget, yet saved when possible.
- All students said that the group needed to start at the beginning of the

year to give them enough time to save money to pay for their accounts as early as possible. This is particularly relevant for students completing their senior year, as students in lower grades could use savings from the previous year to cover Term One school fees.

- Two students used their savings and matched funds (reimbursed for school expenses) to start a small business to support them in their following year at university.
- One student said that through coming to the group he was able to find out information he otherwise would not have known about. He gave the example of QSTEP – which enables economically disadvantaged young people support to gain entrance to university.
- Another student said that though he did not attend the group regularly, he still found out information through other members that passed it on. He was able to 'keep in the loop' even if he didn't come to meetings.
- All students said they thought it was worthwhile participating in the group and felt it should continue so other students could benefit.

Since this initial trial, a second group involving four independent students resulted in similar positive feedback.

Community Connections concludes that using the Micro Savings Model with independent students, responds to the economic needs of these young people by proving financial support through matching savings up to $250 as well as enabling them to develop financial literacy (savings, budgeting and skills to live on small incomes). The Micro Savings Model is an incentive for students to come together as a group, which further enables them to engage in peer support and to connect with a youth and family worker to access the information, referral, advocacy and any support they may require to remain in education.

Supporting Reengagement in Education through Micro Savings

During the process of developing this model in one school community, a number of independent young women supported by Community Connections became disengaged from education. The reasons for this were varied but included experiencing mental health issues, accommodation difficulties, family conflict, pregnancy and parenting, and financial reasons. Community Connections supported these young women to come together and the young women have now formed a 'Coffee Club'. This began as an opportunity to reduce social isolation and develop friendships and support networks. In the formation of this group, the young women shared their goals and dreams and identified financial resources as a major hurdle in achieving these.

The Coffee Club is now developing their own Micro Savings group, based on the Independent Students 'matching' model. Because of the different needs of this group, their saved and the matched funds will be linked to individual savings goals, rather than educational costs. This includes goals such as setting up a household with furniture and white goods. Through the process of defining their own purpose and 'rules' of the group, the participants are gaining ownership of the process, the model and the meetings, which is increasing motivation and participation.

Interestingly, while the needs and goals of the group are diverse, many participants share the goal of reengaging in education, or establishing safe and stable accommodation to enable them to pursue their goals of employment and/or education. Time will tell as to the success of the Micro Savings Project and peer support groups in enabling the independent young women to reengage in education and/or training.

Conclusion

The financial cost of education must be acknowledged and mechanisms put in place to ensure that young people who are economically disadvantaged are given access to education, support to remain in education, and are not discriminated against because of their situation. Peer support groups, access to individual support and referral through community agencies and micro savings are important and powerful in supporting students to address social, emotional and economic barriers, to enable participation in education. However, the responsibility to ensure education can be accessed by all should not simply lie with student initiatives such as the micro savings groups. It is largely the responsibility of Education Queensland to ensure policies are changed to safeguard against discrimination on the grounds of economic hardship as well as promote their responsibility to monitor individual school procedures and practice to ensure high-level policy intent is implemented. As earlier stated, each school is a unique community and experience shows how these communities interpret policies differently through their procedures and young people experineces. Individual interpretation results in varied practices across schools and continued discrimination against independent young people. Consequently, Education Queensland also has a responsibility to educators and school staff to support the implementation of new policy and ensure they are utilised in the spirit intended.

Community agencies must continue to work in partnership with school communities and young people to ensure ongoing advocacy and support to ensure access to education. Rather than exploring how to re-engage the disengaged, our common goal must be to create informed, understanding and inclusive education communities that prevent young people from disengaging as a consequence of their social, emotional and economic experiences.

About the Author

Renee Mills has worked as a Youth and Family worker with Community Connections for two and a half years within both the Youth Support Coordinator and Reconnect programs. Prior to this she worked in housing, mental health, disability and with refugee communities. Particular interests are community development, and engaging young people and school communities in these processes to enact sustainable change.

Community Connections is a community agency working with young people who are at risk of early school and/or young people who are at risk of homelessness or have recently left home. Community Connections also works with families experiencing conflict

New School Ties

Because Schools can't do it alone

By Rosalyn Black

"There are very many schools for whom their community relationships and the support they are able to provide through them is now the limiting factor on their success in educating their pupils" (Craig & O'Leary, 2006).

Introduction

A new report being developed by Education Foundation Australia with funding from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development argues that schools cannot by themselves meet the challenge of engaging, re-engaging and supporting strong educational outcomes for young people, especially where disadvantage is part of the picture. *New School Ties: Networks for Success* proposes that Australian education systems be rebuilt around deep, collaborative networks that bring together schools and other sectors to address the systemic and structural barriers to educational engagement and success. The report builds on the findings of previous Education Foundation Australia research.

The Foundation's *Case for Change* project proposed collaboration between schools across the three different systems – government, Catholic and independent - and between education and other sectors to create collective responsibility for young people's engagement and learning (Education Foundation, 2005). It concluded that cross-sectoral collaboration remains at the margin in Australia and that there are systemic obstacles to upscaling it. These include a lack of policy support and a lack of proven models or examples of collaboration in practice.

The Foundation's most recent research project, *Crossing the Bridge: Overcoming entrenched disadvantage through student-centred learning* (Black, 2007), concluded that the fundamental model of schooling in Australia is not supporting educational excellence for students facing disadvantage. It proposed new models of schooling that include:

1. Funding partnerships between areas of government, business, philanthropy and community organisations to provide young people with powerful learning resources, meet their wider needs and engage and support their families
2. Schools from different sectors working together at a local or district level to share resources, meet the learning needs of all students in the locality and build value for their communities
3. Schools reconfigured as community learning hubs that offer education and other services for the entire community.

Why networks?

Cooperative networks have the potential to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for young people, but their

take-up in Australia is still limited. At a time when the economic and social landscape of developed countries are shaped by connections and connectivity and the directions for 21st century schooling focus on connectedness, the fundamental structures of Australian school education mean that schools still operate largely in isolation. Yet disengagement is best addressed by "multiple, integrated strategies involving students, schools, families, and other organisations within the community" (Butler, Bond, Drew, Krelle & Seal, 2005) and young people's learning needs can only be met through a variety of delivery systems (UNESCO, 1990).

'Network' is one of a large number of terms that describe strategies for groups of organisations and sectors working together. It implies a formal, stable and widespread grouping of organisations that come together for a deliberate, agreed and common purpose linked to a specific region or local area (Chapman & Aspin, 2005; Edwards, Goodwin, Pemberton & Woods, 2000). The OECD defines networks as "purposeful social entities characterised by a commitment to quality, rigour, and a focus on outcomes" (OECD 2003, in Robinson & Keating, 2005).

Networks are part of a global trend by governments to improve policy development and service provision across a range of areas (see Robinson & Keating, 2005, for a comprehensive discussion of the growth of networks). They are seen as one of the most promising levers for large-scale educational reform, with the capacity to boost innovation, build school capacity for change and deliver educational excellence and equity. The United Kingdom, which is leading the field in the development of educational networks, claims that the impact of effective networks includes better engagement, achievement and transitions for students (Hadfield, Jopling, Noden, O'Leary & Stott, 2005).

In part, the school network movement is a response to the inability of the widespread school improvement reforms of the 1990s to improve student outcomes because they did not deal directly with the impact of social factors on student engagement and achievement (West-Burnham & Otero, 2004). As Tom Bentley writes, "schooling systems will not overcome growing patterns of exclusion and marginalisation by incrementally improving their attainment scores. Teaching, resourcing, leadership all matter, but they cannot work in isolation from the wider context" (Bentley, 2006).

More than partnership

The most prevalent form of collaborative effort for education in Australia is the individual, local school-community partnership. The local community provides the most immediate environment for schools to collaborate with groups and individuals who can support young people's learning: parents, local business, local government and community groups serving the area. Collaboration with the local community gives schools the chance to contribute to the community cohesiveness that will directly affect young people's life and learning opportunities. Internationally, the few schools that break the strong nexus between poverty and achievement tend to have relationships with the community that support the school and enrich learning: it has even been suggested that principals in these schools prioritise local community relationships

more highly than principals in lower need schools (Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Mulford, Kendall, Ewington, Edmunds, Kendall & Silins, 2007).

However, individual school-community partnerships have their weaknesses. One of their greatest weaknesses is sustainability. Education foundation Australia has previously observed that "the landscape of school-community partnership is littered with discontinued or underutilised programs that leave little legacy except in the experience of individual students" (Black, 2004). It is hard to say how much this picture is changing, but building partnerships remains a challenge for schools in high poverty areas. These schools need connections with other public services such as health and welfare to engage and support their students but find it difficult to create these connections (Mulford, Kendall, Ewington, Edmunds, Kendall & Silins, 2007). As one school principal testifies: "partnerships with community are outside our experience and expertise. They take a lot of energy and there is no-one to do it all the time" (in Black, 2007).

Another weakness of many partnerships is that they bring about limited change because they do not alter the intrinsic operation of the school, the structures within which it operates or the fundamental model of schooling which it represents (Black, 2004, 2007). They do not sufficiently recognise the need for a "collective societal response" (Mulford, Cranston, Keating & Reid, 2007) to deal with the forces that challenge contemporary schooling. Engaging these forces requires new structural models where schools operate in deep and ongoing collaboration with one another and with both the local and wider community.

Structural models for collaboration

One model for more deeper and more sustainable school-community collaboration is the shared or joint-use facility where the school and community share key infrastructure such as information technology centres, libraries, sports and performing arts facilities. The benefits of such arrangements include stronger links between schools and communities and greater community involvement in young people's learning (Department of Education and Training, 2005).

This work needs to continue and to be taken further. A next step on from shared facilities is the co-location of the school with community services or its inclusion in a precinct that offers multiple services for the community, the kind of model represented by the United Kingdom's full-service Extended Schools program. At their most developed, these schools offer childcare, parental and family support, referral to a range of specialist support services, wider community access to information technology, sports and arts facilities and lifelong learning opportunities for the whole community (Coleman, 2006). They are a significantly more developed version of the Full Service Schools model developed in Australia to address the needs of young people at risk of not completing Year 12. Evidence from the United Kingdom shows that these redesigned and networked schools improve student engagement and achievement. They also strengthen the school's ability to respond to broader family and student needs (Department of Education & Training, 2006).

At the most ambitious level, schools can form part of a learning system that

supports the learner through a range of networks and interlinked services at every stage (Bentley, 2006). This is already taking place in the United States and Scotland, where community schools in disadvantaged areas become a vehicle for neighbourhood renewal and a hub for services that build the capacity of their community.

One more local example shows how networks can support young people's engagement in education. The Derwent District of Tasmania is an area of high educational need. *Real Learnings - Real Futures* began in 2002 as a commitment by all ten secondary school principals in the District to work collaboratively to address issues of student participation, attendance and retention in the area and to generate opportunities that would be impossible for the individual schools to provide on their own. The network involves Bothwell District High School, Bridgewater High School, Claremont High School, Cosgrove High School, Derwent Support Services, Glenora District School, New Norfolk High School, Oatlands District High School, Ouse District High, Rosetta High School and the Derwent District of the Tasmanian Department of Education.

Real Learnings - Real Futures improves the range of learning experiences available to all students in the area. One of its key strategies is the development of student-centred learning across all of the network schools to make the curriculum more relevant and engaging for Year 9 and 10 students. Student-centred learning projects are based both in the schools and in the community. They include boat building, emergency services training, school farm programs, aquaculture, marine adventure courses, multi media, robotics and natural therapies. Most projects involve students from a number of the participating schools rather than single-school groups.

Provision of this range of learning experiences is financially feasible only because of cooperation between the schools. The network also maximises the use of limited school and District resources to meet the learning needs of students at risk of disengagement, building partnerships with other agencies and services to provide "an effective, seamless student support network" (Holdsworth, 2003) and deliver professional learning for teachers to support at-risk students.

A 2003 evaluation shows that the network builds on the strength of each participating school and enhances each school's capacity to efficiently and effectively offer activities to its own and other students (Holdsworth, 2003). It concludes that the benefits for all participating schools exceed what each would achieve alone. It also shows that the network is having strong positive outcomes for student engagement and learning. Students and teachers testify to increased student commitment, better relationships between students and the development of valuable student skills.

Conclusion

There are numerous innovative but isolated examples like Real Learnings - Real Futures. Their success in supporting educational success for young people against strong odds points to the need for more work to demonstrate what collaborative policy and provision could look like for education systems, identify what is required to bring it about and formulate a more clearly defined role for government in creating joined up practice in education. *New School Ties:*

Networks for Success sets out to do some of this work.

The report will inform a new book by Rosalyn Black to be launched in November 2008. *Beyond the Classroom: Building new school networks* will be published by ACER Press.

For further information about this research project, contact Rosalyn Black: ros.black@educationfoundation.org.au

To read the previous Education Foundation Australia reports referred to here, see www.educationfoundation.org.au and go to the Research section.

References

Bentley, T. (2006). Futures for Learning. Presentation to OECD/Mexico International Conference, Emerging Models of Learning and Innovation, Merida, Mexico, June 14 2006

Black, R. (2004). "Thinking Community as a Social Investment in Australia", in Worldwide Partnerships for Schools with Voluntary Organizations, Foundations, Universities, Companies and Community Councils. Ed. Mitchell, S., Klinck, P. & Burger, J., Mellen Press, Canada

Black, R. (2007). Crossing the Bridge: Overcoming entrenched disadvantage through student-centred learning. Melbourne: Education Foundation Australia

Butler, H., Bond, L., Drew, S., Krelle, A. & Seal, I. 2005. Doing It Differently: Improving Young People's Engagement with School. Melbourne: Brotherhood of St Laurence

Chapman, J.D. and Aspin, D.N. (2005). "Why Networks and Why Now?" in International perspectives on networked learning. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership

Coleman, A. (2006). Lessons from Extended Schools. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership

Craig, J. & O'Leary, D. (2006). The Invisible Teacher: How schools can unlock the power of community. London: Demos

Department of Education and Training (2005). Schools as Community Facilities: Policy Framework and Guidelines. Melbourne: Department of Education and Training

Department of Education and Training (2006). The Impact of School Infrastructure on Education Outcomes. Melbourne: Department of Education and Training

Education Foundation (2005). Equity, Excellence and Effectiveness: Moving Forward on Schooling Arrangements in Australia. Melbourne: Education Foundation

Edwards, B., Goodwin, M., Pemberton, S. & Woods, M. (2000). Partnership working in rural regeneration. Bristol: The Policy Press

Hadfield, M., Jopling, M., Noden, C., O'Leary, D. & Stott, A. (2005). The impact of networking and collaboration: the existing knowledge base. A review of multi-agency and community-based forms of networking. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership

Holdsworth, R. (2003). Real Learning - Real Futures: A Derwent District Partnership. A Brief Evaluation and Reflection. Melbourne: Australian Youth Research Centre

Kannapel, P.J., & Clements, S.K. 2005. Inside the black box of high-performing high-poverty schools. Lexington: Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

Mulford, B., Cranston, N., Keating, J. & Reid, A. (2007). The forces impacting upon schools and their public purposes. Part of the literature review for the ARC Linkage Project "Education investment in Australian schooling: Serving public purposes"

Mulford, B., Kendall, D., Ewington, J., Edmunds, B., Kendall, L. & Silins, H. (2007) Successful principalship of high-performance schools in high-poverty communities. Journal of Educational Administration, 46 (3)

Robinson, L. & Keating, J. (2005a). Networks and governance: the case of LLENs in Victoria. ARC Linkage Project Occasional Paper No 3. The University of Melbourne

UNESCO (1990). World Declaration on Education for All and Framework for Action

to Meet Basic Learning Needs. Paris: UNESCO

West-Burnham, J., Farrar, M. & Otero, G. (2007) Schools and Communities: Working together to transform children's lives. London: Network Continuum Education

About the author

Rosalyn Black is the Director of Thought Leadership at Education Foundation Australia, an independent, nonprofit organisation with a focus on educational excellence and equality of opportunity. In her current role, she is responsible for the development of research projects that propose and drive new solutions for public education. Her previous roles include education policy analysis for state government and teaching and educational leadership in the public education system.

The role peers play in successful re-engagement

By Sharlene Chadwick

Introduction

In the weeks leading up the commencement of the school year, while launching the State Government's 'social and emotional' education strategy for 2008, Education Minister Rod Welford commented on the need to provide school based programs to encourage positive behaviour and social skills in children and young people. While Mr Welford's comments have been seen as controversial by both parents and teachers, there is no denying there is a very strong link between how connected students feel to school, and how well they function in other areas of their lives. There is a role for social and emotional education within the current framework because studies have shown that generally speaking, those who feel connected to their school community and their peers are less likely to suffer a range of social and emotional problems.

Take for example the case of Ben, a Year 7 student. Ben was not what you would call typically 'disengaged'. He wasn't disruptive and noisy with falling grades. In fact, he was so quiet you would barely know he was in class ... But it was precisely this 'invisibility' that had his teachers worried.

All of the students at Ben's school participate in the Peer Support Program. The program is integrated into the school's curriculum and teaches students important life skills and community values. In the case of the Year 7 students, it also teaches leadership skills enabling them to act in a positive mentoring role within the school, establishing relationships with younger students, enhancing a spirit of kinship across the school.

Ben became a 'Peer Leader' and this was a significant turning point for him. When asked to 'step up to the mark and be an example for his younger peers', Ben embraced the opportunity and really came out of his shell. He is now more communicative and responsive with other students and teachers, and much more engaged in group activities which are having a positive effect not only on his class work, but his overall contribution to the school across many areas. Ben has learned life skills, which will not only assist his transition into high school, but beyond – into adulthood.

Ben is just one positive example of the Peer Support Program in action. Peer Support Australia has a track record of success stories that spans 30 years. Predominantly, the program has operated in New South Wales schools – with funding assistance from the NSW Government. The program is also now available in Queensland.

One of the reasons the Peer Support Program enjoys a high level of success is that it is not based on the theory if teachers understand what is causing a student's disengagement, they can do something about it. While this is certainly a sound philosophy it does rely heavily on an honest dialogue between student and teacher and is potentially a strategy that would really only encounter success in smaller well resourced schools where teachers can spend significant one

on one time with students developing mutual trusting, open relationships. Peer groups at school are a powerful factor for engagement of young people. Over 96% of young people believe being connected to peers is important and friendships and socialising are the most important factors in engaging with school. This suggests that for young people who are alienated from their families, peer connectedness may be their most important protective factor. Learning is a social activity: our learning is intimately associated with our connection with other human beings, our teachers, our peers, our family as well as casual acquaintances.

On the other hand, peer led interventions such as the Peer Support Program have demonstrated success in all schools, and have an important role to play in larger schools where teacher resources are limited and stretched, as well as in cases where students are rebelling against authority figures and teacher/student relationships are at risk and where student attachment to school is poor.

What is the Peer Support Program?

The Peer Support Program is a peer led, skills based, experiential learning program. The emphasis of the program is on developing and enhancing skills amongst young people for lifelong learning and wellbeing. The program is integrated into curricula, sustained from Year 1 through to Year 12.

The Peer Support Program is aligned with national frameworks including the National Safe Schools Framework, Values Education Framework, MindMatters, KidsMatter and the National Centre Against Bullying. The program has been developed over a number of years and schools which implement the Peer Support Program are invited to provide ongoing feedback as part of a continuing quality assurance process. This process ensures the program content is modified in line with current thought and practice in teaching and learning and keeps the program relevant for students of all ages.

Another of the reasons the Peer Support Program is so successful is simply that it is peer led. In a national survey of 29,000 young people recently carried out by Mission Australia, young people were asked to rank what they valued. Family relationships and friendships were highly valued by a very significant proportion of respondents and ranked first and second respectively. Physical and mental health was ranked third. This survey confirmed that 86% of respondents identified friends as their main source of advice.

The potential is compelling in view of the preference of young people to be supported by peers. One study found secondary school students spend twice as much time with their peers as with their parents or other adults. Peers become potentially powerful models for socialisation, positive behaviours, motivation and achievement. More recently, researchers have acknowledged peer groups in bringing about positive changes. Given these findings, traditional mental health programs may not succeed in providing effective intervention. Schools remiss in capitalising on the help seeking patterns of adolescents may be forfeiting valuable opportunities to address student engagement.

Anecdotal evidence supplied by participating schools also attests to the program's success, and this 'intangible' evidence was recently supported by independent research conducted by both

the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and James Cook University (JCU).

Case studies were conducted by JCU in 2005 to determine the effectiveness of the Peer Support Program in Primary schools. Findings concluded the program has a constructive influence on:

- developing social relations and interactions;
- contributing positively to whole school activities; and
- demonstrating understandings of abstract concepts.

A longitudinal study was conducted by UWS in 2001-02 which involved 2,300 secondary students to determine the efficacy of the Peer Support Program. The results found positive long term benefits for students and school communities by achieving cultural change. The results found the Peer Support Program:

- assisted students to successfully negotiate the transition from primary to secondary school;
- increased the self confidence of those participating;
- increased their enjoyment of school;
- improved relationships with others - peers and teachers;
- improved perceptions of support from others;
- developed cooperative teamwork;
- developed positive academic self concept; and
- successfully changed attitudes toward bullying behaviours.

The Peer Support Program can also be specifically used as a means of countering aggressive behaviour, decelerating anger arousal and reducing bullying in secondary schools. There is evidence to suggest the Peer Support Program is effective in decreasing the negative effects of bullying behaviours. As the Peer Support Program is a universal intervention program early intervention is paramount in decreasing the potential negative effects of transition.

How the program operates within the school framework

In primary schools, peer groups are typically facilitated by two Year 7 students with small multi-age groups from Year 1 through to Year 6. In secondary schools, the traditional approach is Year 11 facilitating small groups for Year 8 to support them through their transition phase to secondary school.

Peer Support Australia advocates that teachers actively supervise the groups to maximise the potential for success. Student learning materials, known as modules, have a cross curricula focus and are consistent with key educational policies and perspectives. Modules cover a range of topics such as orientation, relationships, optimism, resilience, values and anti-bullying. Sessions within all modules include opportunities for students to develop positive relationships with others; engage learners; develop skills, understandings and attitudes; work cooperatively and collaboratively; and reflect on their experiences. All of these enhance student wellbeing over time and engage students in their school experience.

The research found the Peer Support Program is an excellent mechanism for facilitating social change across year groups and hence creating a positive school climate. It can also be a powerful strategy for enhancing the leadership ability of students. There is also solid evidence to suggest it has the potential to make significant contributions to schools efforts to achieve positive outcomes. In addition, 33% of students reported the Peer Support Program enhanced students' communication, social,

decision making and problem solving skills.

"Peer Support is like a key to unlock the qualities you never thought you'd have for your life," says one student Peer leader.

These results are clearly a positive endorsement of the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Peer Support Program in schools. It provided students with a source of social and psychological support that may be otherwise lacking in their lives and develops capacity building skills. When asked to consider the benefits, there was consensus among students and teachers that the participants gained a sense of acceptance and understanding from their peers. "It has helped me gain stronger friendships with my peers," says one student. Several of the students also indicated the experience provided them with a sense of social connection and self worth and improved their coping skills.

Limitations

The organisation of the Peer Support Program within individual schools also presents limitations to the effectiveness of the Program. Several schools deviated from the best practice model as recommended by Peer Support Australia. A number of Peer leaders reported they received little useful feedback from teachers. It is imperative teachers ensure the Peer leaders are provided with constant support and frequent opportunities to be debriefed about their experiences. Results suggest it may be beneficial for schools to allocate additional time and resources to the coordinator of the Peer Support Program so teachers can effectively brief and debrief Peer leaders. This provides them with useful feedback and gives them appropriate levels of support throughout the Peer Support Program.

Peer leaders also indicated they would have appreciated greater teacher support during the actual sessions. Peer Support Australia advocates teachers actively supervise the groups however, this is not always the case. To maximise the potential for success, school based interventions such as the Peer Support Program requires the continued support of teachers, including those not directly involved. Interventions such as the Peer Support Program result in deviations to the normal school routine and thus the support of the entire staff is necessary.

A delay for some schools in commencing the Peer Support Program at the start of the year resulted in several students indicating that participating in sessions which focused on orientation to the secondary school environment would have been more beneficial at the start of the year. Some schools were conducting orientation sessions in term 2 - May or June. This was necessitated because of the initial testing that needed to be conducted and time constraints within individual schools. Peer Support Australia recommends the orientation component of the Peer Support Program be conducted in the first few weeks of students beginning secondary school to gain the maximum benefits.

Several teachers within the schools indicated the implementation of the Peer Support Program would be easier the following year. It must be noted all schools involved in this research had not previously conducted a Peer Support Program and various issues may have arisen due to their inexperience in conducting such a program in their schools.

Conclusion

There is currently strong evidence that school based intervention programs can achieve positive mental health outcomes in terms of reduced risk and increased functioning. There is also strong evidence for the effectiveness of the Peer Support Program as a prevention program related to adolescent mental health by highlighting the ability to impact upon the mental health of young people. Mental health is considered to be a state of emotional and social wellbeing in which individuals can cope with the normal stresses of life and achieve their potential. It includes being able to work productively and contribute to community life. One in seven young people aged 4 -17 years are reported to have a mental health problem - internalising problems such as anxiety, depression; and externalising problems such as oppositional defiance, conduct disorders, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorders. Mental health problems can be identified by gender. Girls aged 4 -14 years have a higher proportion of internalising problems, while for boys in the same age group, externalising problems are more common.

Evidence continues to accumulate regarding child and adolescent mental health problems in Australia. When implemented effectively, the Peer Support Program improves the mental wellbeing of students. The Peer Support Program is a valuable learning experience for students and in conjunction with other strategies provides a powerful tool for engaging young people in education.

For further information www.peersupport.edu.au.

About the Author

Sharlene Chadwick is the Training and Development Manager for Peer Support Australia, an organisation she has been with for 13 years. She has a background in secondary education and has been involved in the research, evaluation and development of peer led programs for several years. Sharlene has a Masters in Professional Education and Training and is currently researching the positive effects of the Peer Support Program's Anti-bullying programs through Deakin University.

Caring for Kids

By Ilena Young

Introduction

Educational achievement is recognised as having the potential to increase health and wellbeing outcomes for disadvantaged individuals, with educational participation a key factor in long-term wellbeing. An increase in educational retention can create social capital, wellbeing and better health outcomes. However studies show teenage mothers are more likely have fewer family supports and be uninvolved in the school system, due to their pre-existing socio-economic circumstances. If pregnant young women who are school aged do not go on to complete year 12, this can place great limitations on later employment and educational opportunities.

Given the high local rates of pregnant and parenting young women in Albury – Wodonga and the surrounding area, a short course, "Caring for Kids ", was designed to attract young women back into education, increasing participation rates by considering the barriers faced by young women seeking to continue an engagement, or to reengage, with education. "Caring for Kids" met the needs of young mothers during pregnancy and/or after the birth, was based on the Certificate III in Children's Services and operates as a partnership project.

The course acts as an effective way of reengaging young mothers, with 64% who expressed an interest moving into engagement. The course also effectively maintains engagement, with 46% of those enrolled attending over 70% of the classes, and 71% expressing an interest in further study. After 18 months of development "Caring for Kids " has been shown to strongly attract young mothers, successfully reengage them, and produce successful, ongoing involvement with mainstream education, health and other services. The course builds social capital, develops perceptions that education is an option, builds self-esteem, and strengthens confidence in parenting.

The context

It is generally recognised that completing school is a critical factor in establishing overall quality of life and future life pathways of young mothers and their children (Boulden 2001, Harrison et al 2002). Educational achievement has the potential to increase health and welling outcomes for individuals who are otherwise severely disadvantaged. We know that an increase in educational retention can increase social capital, wellbeing and health outcomes for young parents (SHine SA 2007).

However, there is considerable evidence that those becoming a mother as a teenager are more likely to have other children when young, more likely to live in reduced circumstances and less likely to finish any form of formal education (Pittaway 2006 quoting numerous sources from 1984 to 2004). Such research also shows that when babies of teenage mothers have poorer outcomes, this is usually connected in some way with pre-existing socio-economic conditions rather than age.

Very little consistent data on young parents exists in Australia, and this situation is even poorer when considering their engagement with education. However a study in South Australia (SHine SA 2007) recently showed that:

- The teenage confinement (birth) rate had risen among the most disadvantaged;
- Understandings of issues in relation to pregnant and parenting teenagers are defined as social or welfare issues rather than rights or equity based issues;
- Very little data is collected about this group as a whole, particularly in relation to engagement with education and consequent longer-term outcomes.

This research also showed that pregnant young women who are school aged rarely go on to complete year 12, and that young mothers face complex barriers continuing their engagement, or reengaging, with education. Many start from a background of poor educational achievement, and this is very easily reconfirmed and reinforced by various forms of exclusion during pregnancy and parenting.

Risks for pregnant and parenting teenagers are likely to be higher in rural and regional areas (Carter & Spear 2002) with these areas also likely to suffer from insufficient services to meet pregnancy and parenting needs (DHFS 2005). With regard to Victorian births to young mothers, data from the Department of Human Services shows births to mothers under 20 consistently remain higher in rural areas than metro areas. In the Hume region this figure was 5.2% in 2002, i.e. 2 to 3 times the rate of some metro areas, and data for 2004 shows similar rural-metro discrepancies. Research carried out by local services and universities (Youth and Family Services 2003), combined with anecdotal information and evidence from local youth agencies and health services, suggests that this situation continues in the numbers of young pregnant women (15-25) giving birth in our surrounding area. (UHCHS 2003). With regard to local data about births to young mothers within this region of Hume, data for 2005-6 shows that births to young women 25 and under at Wodonga Regional Health Service (which offers obstetrics services to the cross-border region of the Albury -Wodonga area) were 418. This figure represented 25.8% of total births (WRHS, BOS 2006).

Responding to these issues & needs - "Caring for Kids"

In response to local needs and regional issues, "Caring for Kids" has been developed as a short course that has attracted young mothers, successfully reengaging them, and producing strong outcomes in relation to ongoing involvement with education, health and other services. The course has been shown to act as an effective strategy for reengaging young mothers through developing a perception that education is an option, building personal self-esteem, and deepening confidence in parenting.

"Caring for Kids" has been designed to meet the needs of young mothers during pregnancy and/or after the birth, integrating the delivery of workplace competencies, support for parenting and the development of consistent and ongoing relationships with a variety of education, health and other services. The course is based on the Certificate III in Children's Services, has been developed over 18 months using a service industry and action research approach, and operates as a partnership between health, education and other services.

"Caring for Kids" focuses on five of the competencies from the Certificate III in Children's Services that are the most engaging and relevant to parenting. These have been focussed to engage young mothers during pregnancy and/or after the birth. This has involved developing a format that can deliver competency training and support simultaneously without compromising the effectiveness of either. Working to a small group format, the course runs over 8 weeks, and is taught over two days each week. Delivery is through an education provider, with the usual course management processes and procedures. Tutors are selected for their ability to meet the needs and demands of these students, and the course is offered in a space and place that will enhance the development of a strong connection between the young mothers and the educational premises and staff.

From a young mother's perspective the course offers opportunities to gain a workplace qualification, meet other young people in a similar situation, have a break from caring for their child/ren, and learn skills that are relevant to their parenting. The course focuses on competencies on subjects that are relevant to their parenting.

Who has "Caring for Kids" attracted

Between April 06 to November 07 this course attracted the following students:

1. A total of 91 young mothers expressed an interest in doing the course.;
2. Of these, 19 did not enrol then, but again expressed interest at a later stage;
3. 80% of those who expressed an interest but enrolled at a later stage, decided to enrol the following term, the other 20% enrolled three terms later;
4. Of the 91 young mothers who expressed an interest, 50 enrolled immediately and 9 went on to enrol at a later stage, giving a 64.8% enrolment rate overall.

The target group for this project was young parents under 20, however considerable interest was consistently expressed by young parents aged 20 to 25. Unfortunately in most cases this need could not be met due to a lack of suitable funding.

Table 1: Conversion of Expressions of Interest (EoI) to Enrolments by age

Age Group	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	> 21	Total
No. of EoI's	3	13	17	24	16	6	8	4	91
As a % of total EoI's	3.3	14.3	18.7	26.4	17.6	6.6	8.8	4.4	64.8
No. resulting enrolments	1	12	11	15	11	2	5	2	59
As a % of total enrolments	1.7	20.3	18.6	25.5	18.6	3.4	8.5	3.4	100

The majority of those expressing an interest already had a child, however there was a large sub-group of interest from young mothers who were pregnant.

Table 2: Expressions of Interest and Enrolments by Parenting Status

Status	Pregnant	1 child aged <1	1 child aged 1-2	1 child aged 2+	Attending as a friend	2 children aged < 4
No of EoI's	38	28	8	4	4	8
As a % of total EoI	41.8	30.8	8.8	4.4	4.4	8.8
No. of resulting enrolments	27	19	6	1	2	4
As a % of total enrolments	45.7	32.2	10.2	1.7	3.4	6.8

Who went on to enrol in "Caring for Kids"?

Of the 59 who enrolled, 51 gave meaningful information that showed:

- The young mothers who enrolled were all born in Australia,
- All speak English as a main language, and
- All speak English very well.
- 25.5% of enrolling students identified as Aboriginal or ATSI; and
- 13.7% identified as having a disability or learning difficulty.
- 94% of those enrolling had a child that needed childcare to be available.

With regard to employment status, most identified as not-employed:

- Not employed 54.9 %
- Unemployed looking for part-time work 19.6 %
- Unemployed looking for full-time work 5.9 %
- Employed but unpaid in a family business 2.0 %
- No information given 17.6 %

For highest school grade completed, the majority had completed Grade 10 or under:

- Grade 9 or under 35.3 %
- Grade 10 45.1 %
- Grade 11 13.7 %
- Grade 12 3.9 %
- No info 21.6 %

As to when this was completed, there was a fairly even spread over the past 6 years:

- Prior to 2003 23.5 %
- In year 2003 / 2004 35.3 %
- In year 2005 / 2006 35.3 %
- No info 21.6 %

Only 17.6% had another qualification, and in most cases this was a Certificate I or II.

Young parents expressing an interest had been told about the course from a variety of sources, of which the main three were children and family services, word of mouth and dedicated youth support agencies.

- Children and family services 29.7 %
- Word of Mouth or Independently 26.4 %
- Dedicated youth support agencies 25.3 %
- Educational establishments 9.9 %
- Other health services 6.6 %
- Other agencies 2.2 %

Their reasons for doing the course were very much to do with personal interest:

- Personal Interest 58.8 %
- Self development 27.5 %
- To get a job 15.7 %
- Other reasons 15.7 %
- To try for a different career 3.9 %
- To get into another course 2.0 %

Outcomes from an educational engagement perspective

Between April 2006 and November 2007 "Caring for Kids" achieved the following:

- Of the 91 young mothers who expressed an interest, 50 enrolled immediately and 9 went on to enrol at a later stage, giving a 64.8% enrolment rate overall.

Of the 59 young mothers who enrolled,

- 35 (59.3%) went on to attend over 50% of the course
- 27 (45.8%) went on to attend over 70% of the course

Attendance rates were directly connected with competencies for this course, since it was set up with very little home work which made attendance in class essential if someone was to obtain competencies. Given the number of factors that might affect someone's attendance in any one week, competencies were taught one at a time so that if someone had to miss class (to give birth, or due to illness etc) they still had the opportunity to pass the other competencies taught during other weeks. Therefore a 70% attendance rate meant that someone gave themselves the opportunity to study/gain 4 or 5 competencies. These competencies meet the national criteria and therefore each one gained can be set against further enrolments in Certificate III in Children's Services or other relevant courses.

However, actual competencies gained are not given here as an outcome for two reasons. The first is that with over 80% of students having completed only Grade 9/10 or under, literacy and numeracy issues can be expected to affect attainment of competencies, and so competencies do not truly reflect the levels of engagement

achieved. This leads to the second reason which is that this course was designed as an educational engagement strategy, opening up education as a choice in the lives of young parents. Therefore attainment of competencies was seen as a bonus rather than core business.

For the 24 (40.7%) who did not attend even 50% of the course, the reasons differed:

- heavily disengaged and present only after strong encouragement from friends or case workers 9
- A friend stopped going and so they did too 5
- Didn't like the subject matter (focus on childcare) 3
- Illness 2
- Moved away 2
- No show with no reason given 2
- Personality differences with someone in class 1

From this there would seem to be few structural barriers that could be addressed, which may also indicate that barriers have been successfully addressed in the design and support provided for the course.

With regard to young mums who were heavily disengaged, one remarkable story concerned a mum under 20 with two children in permanent care who is notoriously difficult to engage. She was persuaded to come along to the course by a friend, attended for 4 sessions, and gained one competency. This apparently was the first time in her life that she had gained a 'tick' for anything educational. She has since expressed interest in returning, but has not yet followed through to enrol.

With regard to the creation of ongoing engagement with education, during the lifetime of this course, of the 59 young mothers who enrolled 42 (71%) expressed an interest in undertaking further study. This interest did not always translate into action however, particularly for those who had to wait for certain courses to be offered or for a space to become available. .

As of January 2008, of the 59 young mothers who enrolled during this course, over 40% had successfully built a strong connection with education and/or employment

- actively involved in education 23.7 %
- interested in doing more education 11.9 %
- working or doing traineeships 5.1 %

These numbers include 8 who have studied / are studying for VCE/VCAL (as follow on study after this program) and 3 who are moving on to University.

Those listed as interested here includes only young parents who recently expressed a serious intent that seems likely to follow through to an enrolment.

Ongoing engagement in education is something that was monitored every quarter (to the best of our knowledge given that some moved away etc). It also covers wide

variations given that the course has run over 18 months, covering everything from a young mum who did the course early in 2006 and has now completed VCE and is going on to University, to a mum who did the course late in 2007 and in January 2008 was waiting for the first semester course to start in February.

Outcomes from a young mother's perspective

The course has been effective at reengaging young mothers with education. One of the factors that shows this most strongly is the high number of young mothers who have come through word of mouth. One young mother told us that "when I told my mum I'm going back to school, she nearly fell over!". Some have enrolled when pregnant, taken time out to have the baby, and come back to class on Day 4, 10 or 12 after the birth.

The attraction is partly because the course offers them something they want, and in conversations on enrolment the two major factors here have been that it is a real workplace qualification and that it offers an opportunity to meet 'other mums like me' . A driving factor in the desire to get a qualification is that having a child inspires many to 'get real' about their need to be responsible and provide for their family "so I've got a better life set up for my son whereas before I didn't care what I did". The course also provides an opportunity to engage in learning about parenting without feeling that you are self-identifying as someone who has a weakness in this area.

To enrol they have to overcome their own perceptions about themselves as learners, which can often be negative and deficit based. "I didn't think of myself as being smart or anything". The young mothers identified the learning environment as "Brilliant" with one young mother saying "I met heaps of good mates, the teacher was good ... it's more relaxing and friendly and you can say what you want". This last part was expanded on by another young mother who said that "it wasn't like a school environment, it was more like adults to adults and the teacher treated you more like an adult". This last comment makes great sense when we consider that these young women have been through a major life experience more often shared by older adults than by their peers.

With regard to a sense of social wellbeing the course produced the following positive changes in relation to happiness about:

- the number of friends in the same situation 19.1 % improvement
- doing things away from home 5.2 %
- getting on with people you know 5.0 %
- how often you go out and socialise 4.9 %
- the things you want to be good at 4.5 %
- community attitudes to young mothers 4.4 %

(scale based on Cummins & Lau 2005 'Personal Wellbeing Index – School Children')

With regard to parenting competence the course produced the following positive changes in relation to self-perceptions about:

- being a good parenting role model 8.7 % improvement
- having the skills to be a good parent 8.7 %
- being interested in parenting 7.9 %
- knowing what is needed 7.2 %

(scale based on Johnstone & Mash 1989, 'Being a Parent – Mother' . Further details of these finding are presented in the Appendix)

Outcomes from a partnership perspective

Structurally, the success of "Caring for Kids" stems from the use of a partnership and multi-sector approach, with the ability of the course to deliver different sets of agency targets simultaneously. Within class this means the integration of competencies and support both in and around the classroom. Outside the class room this involves the active cooperation and coordination of education, health and other agencies. These can all be seen as best practice education, health, health promotion and partnership strategies taken to their utmost.

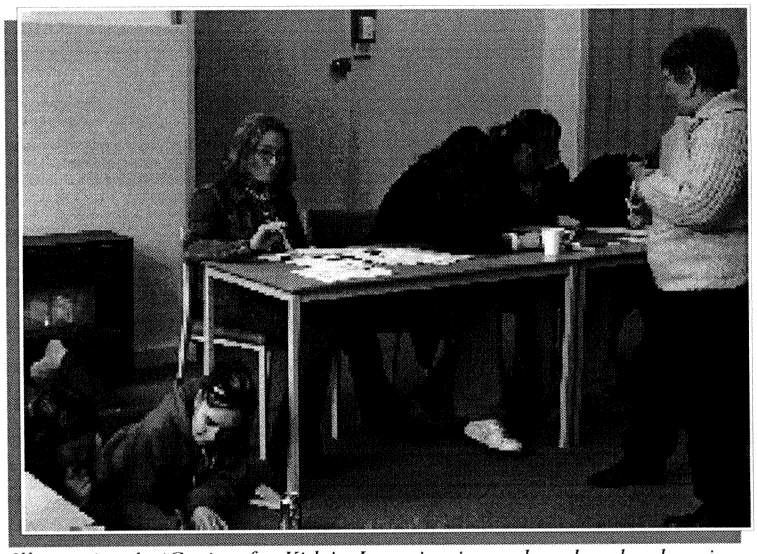


Illustration 1: 'Caring for Kids'- Learning in a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere

Within the classroom the course builds a learning environment that is strength-based, supporting a sense of empowerment and affirmation. This environment encourages young mothers to share, and so validate, their individual knowledge and experiences, within the structures and direction provided by the competencies. Learning and teaching is consultative, offering these young mothers choices, and so supporting the development of decision making and goal setting. A main tutor drives teaching, establishing a key relationship with students, with a secondary tutor teaching some of the five subjects.

The course has been designed to drop as many barriers as possible. Within the framework of delivering competencies, the course is flexible, with children allowed in the class-room when needed ie babies are too young for childcare or when

mothers are very nervous. The majority of assessment takes place during class, with assessment therefore dependent on attendance on a regular basis. Childcare is accessible and available on-site at affordable rates, transport vouchers are available once the student attends on the first day, and all initial enrolment fees are waived.

The course has also developed additional support above and beyond usual educational practices, with regular lunches shared by students and services, and study support available to any current or past "Caring for Kids"" young mother. In this case, study support has been provided by the key tutor, which again confirms consistency and continuity for young mothers within an ongoing key relationship

Outside the classroom marketing has been driven by Upper Hume Community Health Service via a regional Teenage Pregnancy & Sexual Health Network (which brings together youth, health, education, family support and other services). Assertive outreach is used to engage hard-to-reach clients who might not be connected with case managers or the service system. Ongoing engagement is then driven by health, support services and education to try to ensure that every young mother engaged is offered the necessary supports during the course, and then supported in exploring and following the ongoing pathway of their choice (whether in education or not).

Conclusions

Given the significance of education as a factor in overall quality of life and future life pathways for young mothers and their families, it is critical that we develop effective educational opportunities that young parents actively want to engage with.

In response to these needs and issues, "Caring for Kids" was developed as a short course in regional Australia. It has attracted young mothers, successfully reengaged them, and produced strong outcomes with ongoing involvement with mainstream services. This course has shown that young mothers want to engage with education.

To achieve this success "Caring for Kids" was specifically designed to meet the needs of young mothers during pregnancy and/or after the birth, integrating the delivery of workplace competencies, support for parenting, and the development of consistent and ongoing relationships. The attraction of the course to young mothers was partly because it offered a real workplace qualification whilst also offering an opportunity to meet 'other mums like me'.

This project also succeeded because it took young mothers perspectives and melded them with multi-sector perspectives to create a successful solution that simultaneously addresses very different sets of needs. This meant great support across the board from a variety of services, formal agency networks, and informal young mothers networks, which then all generated further interest and support.

In so doing, this project also tackled the myths and attitudes that might undermine our thinking about young parents, showing a pathway away from welfare and problem based attitudes towards projects that are based on strengths and affirmative solutions. This was supported by positive promotion of the course, through networks and word of mouth, but also through the media, telling the stories and celebrating and acknowledging the very real achievements made by the young

mothers involved.

From here the aim is to develop the model further, with health and education in partnership, building versions of similar programs that might appeal to more vulnerable young parents, young dads, and those in our indigenous community. The aim at all times will be to develop a pathways approach, breaking down courses and competencies into desirable and achievable pieces that lead to educational recognition, increased self-confidence, and the next step on the path to the future.

The author

For the past 2 years ilena young has been the coordinator for Young Parents Programs at Upper Hume Community Health Service, also facilitating the Albury-Wodonga Teen Pregnancy and Sexual Health Network. Prior to this her work included teaching and running her own business, and she has worked in service industries for over 25 years. ilena's passion is developing equity, awareness and understanding, particularly in relation to young people's issues. For the young parents project this means developing services that cater to their needs and offer them opportunities & choices in relation to raising their family and parenting their children.

References

Carter, K. and Spear, H. (2002) *Knowledge attitudes and behaviour related to pregnancy in a rural teenage population.* Journal of Community Health Nursing 19(2)

Boulden, K. (2001) Pregnant, present and proud: Keeping Young Mums in Education. Sandgate, Qld: Association of Women Educators/

Cummins, R. and Lau, A.L.D. (2005) Personal Wellbeing Index – School Children 3rd ed. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Department of Education and Early Childhood (2008) Structure of the new Department. Accessed via the internet on 19 February 2008 at http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/directions/changestodepartment.htm

Department of Health and Family Services (2005) Making Choices. Young people and pregnancy in Tasmania. Hobart: DHFS.

Jenner, R. (2003) Teenage Pregnancy In Wodonga. Wodonga: Upper Hume Community Health Service

Johnston, C., & Mash, E. J. (1989). *A measure of parenting satisfaction and efficacy.* Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 18

Office of Children and Young People. (2002) Families First Area Planning Guidelines. Sydney: OCYP.

Harrison, L., Angwin, J. and Shacklock, G. (2002) Having a baby and being in school: researching pregnant and parenting young people and their educational transitions. AARE International Conference, Brisbane: University of Queensland

Phillips, L.. (2003) Support Needs of Pregnant and Parenting Young Women who are Homeless or at risk of Homelessness. Albury: Youth and Family Services.

Pittaway, S. (2006) Discomforting the research spirit: Uncomfortable narratives of being and becoming a researcher. AARE International Conference,

SHine, SA (2007) HYPE: Healthy Young Parents in Education – Final Report. Adelaide: SHine.

Appendix

The data in this paper referring to scales was taken from the following results.

Questions based on Cummins & Lau 2005 'Personal Wellbeing Index – School Children

Scale being 10 strongly agree to 1 strongly disagree

	Before	After	Diff
How happy are you ...			
with your life as a whole	7.58	7.43	-0.15
about the things you have (money, things you own)	7.11	7.21	0.10
with your health	8.14	7.57	-0.57
about the things you want to be good at	7.69	8.14	0.45
About getting on with the people you know	8.86	9.36	0.50
about how safe you feel	8.39	8.21	-0.17
about doing things away from home	8.19	8.71	0.52
about what might happen to you later on in life	7.64	7.57	-0.07

These figures indicate an overall positive shift, particularly in relation to doing things away from home, getting on with the people you know, and about the things that the young mums want to be good at. However this was accompanied by a negative shift especially in relation to happiness about personal health.

Questions added due to service concern about these issues

Scale being 10 strongly agree to 1 strongly disagree

	Before	After	Diff
How happy are you ...			
about how often you go out and socialise	6.58	7.07	0.49
about how many friends you have who are in the same situation as you	5.94	7.86	1.91
about being a parent	9.00	9.21	0.21
about your friends understanding what it is like to be young and pregnant and/or a mum	7.69	7.71	0.02
about community attitudes to young girls who are pregnant and/or a mum	6.78	7.21	0.44

These figures indicate a particularly positive shift in relation to being happy about having friends in the same situation, about going out to socialise, and about community attitudes.

Questions based on Johnstone & Mash 1989, 'Being a Parent – Mother'

Scale being 10 strongly agree to 1 strongly disagree

Parenting Efficacy	Before	After	Diff
I make a good role model for new parents who want to learn how to be a good parent	7.56	8.43	0.87
I do a good job as a parent	8.75	8.85	0.10
If something is troubling my child then I can work out what it is	8.58	8.46	-0.12
I know what I need to do to be a good parent	8.64	9.36	0.72
Being a parent is as satisfying as I expected it to be	8.64	8.85	0.21
I have all the skills I need to be a good parent	7.92	8.79	0.87

These figures indicate a positive shift in relation to self-perceptions about being a good role model, knowing what is needed to be a good parent, and having the necessary skills.

Questions based on Johnstone & Mash 1989, 'Being a Parent – Mother'

Scale being 10 strongly agree to 1 strongly disagree

Parental satisfaction	Before	After	Diff
It's hard to know if I'm doing a good job or bad job as a parent	7.47	7.38	-0.09
My interests/skills are in other areas not parenting	5.72	4.93	-0.79
Parenting leaves me feeling drained and exhausted	6.67	6.29	-0.38
Being a parent makes me tense and anxious	4.89	5.31	0.42
It's really difficult to decide how to parent your child	6.03	6.29	0.26
It seems like I am so busy as a parent that I never get anything else done	6.17	6.23	0.06

These figures indicate a shift towards interest in parenting (where the negative difference indicates greater interest). They also indicate a shift towards being less drained and exhausted, finding it less difficult to decide how to parent your child, but at the same time - more tense and anxious.

Tapping into the potential of the Australian teenage male

By Wendy Pope

Author's note: I am not advocating the following for every boy or excluding girls. I am offering a suggestion for those boys who are not 'succeeding' academically in our education system. The paper is meant to provoke thought and initiate discussion.

What harm are our modern society and education systems doing to our boys?

As a mother of four boys, a school teacher, a TAFE teacher, employment consultant and a career adviser I have encountered a lot of boys either in the education system or as early school leavers looking for work. A large proportion of these would be considered 'failures' due to low academic achievement in the education system. At the beginning of their secondary education these boys have varying talents and potential. How then, do they get to the stage where they drop out of school, can't get a job and may be exhibiting anti-social behaviour?

Modern society

Our society has 'progressed' so much that we no longer have the choices of outdoor, physical work that young males had in previous generations.

Our expectations are skewed towards academic success. Everyone has different talents and abilities. A child is not 'dumb' just because they don't achieve academically. It is a matter of identifying them and fostering in them something that will benefit the child and society. We don't need to devalue academic ability. We do need to give equal value to non-academic skills and abilities.

What can these young males contribute to our society?

Scenario from our past

Boy lives at home with two parents and numerous extended family members nearby. As he progresses through adolescence he is surrounded by male role models. The extended family live just around the corner. Roaming around the streets, playing with his friends, he grows up, knowing the people who do the plumbing, or repair the roads or sell the groceries. If he lives in a city or a town he is getting pocket money by doing deliveries. If he lives in the country he is doing chores around the farm. At 14 he is considered old enough to leave school and gets a job on the railway, on a farm, with a tradey or in a shop. There are countless outdoor occupations to choose from.

At an age where hormones are causing all sorts of behaviour he is out mixing with older males learning how to be a man. He has started the growing up that happens in a work environment where there are male role models.

Scenario from today

Boy lives at home, maybe in a single parent family, with no male relatives nearby. Today families are smaller and scattered. The extended family doesn't live just around the corner. Due to safety concerns he may have to stay inside after school. Leisure activities are much more

likely to be sedentary and occur within the four walls of the home. At fourteen he is considered only to be in the early part of his high school education. The casual, or after school, jobs available to him are usually in hospitality or customer service. TV means he has a broader vicarious knowledge of possible occupations but our modern society has disabled him when it comes to knowing the people in these jobs. He can't leave school because he would be considered a drop out. If he did, society would consider him well on the way to being unemployable.

Education Systems

The reduced intimacy with males in real jobs is exacerbated by our education system. Our schools are predominantly female orientated. Most teachers are female, especially in infants and primary schools. Classroom learning has evolved to suit females. Reading, writing and sitting still are measures of success. The kids who do this are getting the positive feedback. Consider our genetic history - who sat in the cave and nurtured and communicated?

What were the males doing? They were out hunting and actively solving problems. How far removed in evolution are our boys from our hunter ancestors? It is in the genetic blueprint of our boys to learn by doing. Our education systems expect them to sit still and listen. Instead we have hormonal teenage boys who learn by doing, by being active. We are doing the proverbial 'fitting square pegs into round holes'.

The result

Outcomes from the current system include behavioural problems that impact on teachers, on other students, on families and on society as a whole. But what about the view these young men have of themselves? We are turning out young males with low self-esteem who exhibit aggressive and anti-social behaviour. What impact is that going to have on future generations?

Talk to any disengaged young male about what they want to do and invariably it is something outside and/or something with their hands. They don't want to sit in an office all day. They have been sitting in a classroom for the last ten years. They know they are not suited to it. I'm sure all of the teachers who have had to cope with behavioural problems in the last five years would also agree. So why are we keeping these boys at school? Is their literacy going to improve once they get to high school, if they hate being there? The longer they are in the traditional school system the more the cycle escalates and any positive view they have of their role in society fades.

Alternative scenario

Boy starts to spend a few days a week from the beginning of high school at work for which he receives pocket money. He is in practical, work-related and living skills, literacy and numeracy classes. He also has electives where he can choose to do other high school subjects in class or on-line.

At an early age, before he becomes a 'behavioural', problem he is out there mixing with males, learning hands-on practical skills and being exposed to the real need for literacy and numeracy.

If we have this type of a flexi-school how do we avoid creating a second best system for marginalised young people? By not considering them as marginalised in the first place. The only way we can

stop this, is by valuing all education and ability, not just academic. We need to bring back the regard and esteem for jobs that people get when they are fourteen. These have become the poorest paid despite often being the hardest work. Academic success at school age is seen as a necessity for success in life. We must work to change attitudes that measure success.

The recent proliferation of 'men's sheds' is a step in the right direction. Can we incorporate this into our education systems? Trade schools and Australian Technical Colleges are positive moves but in the political football that education has become we seem to lose sight of the real reason they should be in existence. Not to make a particular, state or political party or government funded programme look good, not to say, 'Hey we're great, because we're doing something about the skill shortage'. But to give our boys real skills, a chance of success in life and build strong, confident people with great self esteem.

We need the untapped manual dexterity, the active problem solving, the divergent thinking, the persistence and the energy of these wonderful young people.

Strong, confident young people help build a strong, confident, skilled nation.

About the Author

Wendy holds a BA, Dip Ed and a Grad Cert in Career Counselling and is the mother of four boys.

Wendy grew up in rural NSW. After completing a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Psychology and Australian History, and a Diploma in Education at the University of New England she taught in a small school in the Northern Territory for three years. She has over fifteen years experience in western NSW working with the unemployed as a part time teacher with TAFE NSW and as an employment consultant. Following the completion of a Graduate Certificate in Career Counselling in 2005 she worked as the Regional Industry Career Adviser in Western NSW, under the Australian Government Initiative, Career Advice Australia. She is currently working on writing Adopt-a-School Programmes with Rural Skills Australia, is a partner in a small office solutions business, Grey Matter Management, and is back teaching job seeking skills and workplace communication subjects with TAFE. She is also mother of one plant mechanic (who now works in mining and earns way more than his mother), one auto electrician (who we struggled to keep in school until the end of year 10 and who bought a house the day he turned eighteen), one apprentice motor vehicle mechanic (who bought a brand new ute as a second year apprentice) and one university graduate (who thought he would earn big $$$$ but is still waiting!).