



Engaging Students in Engaging Schools:

Lessons from Queensland's alternative education sector

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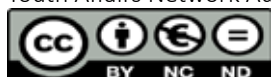


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Executive Summary

The Study

This report builds upon a pilot study that was conducted for YANQ in 2010 (Mills and McGregor, 2010) in that study we collected data from a small, diverse group of alternative schools in South-East Queensland. We identified some of the practices that had worked to engage marginalised young people facing very difficult life circumstances back into learning. This ARC funded project was able to build upon the pilot study by adding regional, rural and remote case study alternative schools that cater to the needs of some of the most marginalised young people in Queensland to the data. Funding also enabled extensive phone interviews to be carried out with workers in the youth field across the state and the implementation of surveys with young people and workers in these schools and also with some young people not in education or work.

The specific aims of the project were:

- to determine principles necessary to cater to the needs of young people who have become disengaged from mainstream schooling and have become unaccounted for in continuing education, training or work;
- to explore and assess the effectiveness of alternative pathways and flexible educational options currently available for those young people who have rejected or been rejected by mainstream schooling; and
- to develop future frameworks to improve and augment existing provision of alternative pathways and flexible educational options that cater to the needs of marginalised young people.

Findings

1. A common framework of practices is evident across the variety of alternative schools studied. Specifically:
 - *Material supports*: these supports work to 'clear the path' for learning by ensuring that young people have their material needs met (e.g. food, shelter, clothing, legal representation, crèches);
 - *School climate*: a positive school climate that is student-centred, flexible and relational, is values-centred and community orientated ensures that young people develop an attachment to their school, this may occur through, for example, emotional support being provided by youth workers helping young people to deal with grief, loss, abuse, neglect and discrimination;
 - *Pedagogy and curriculum*: pedagogical practices that are flexible and responsive to the needs of students and curricula that challenge students intellectually and encourage them to see learning as meaningful to them ensure that the schools are neither 'dumping grounds' or 'drop in centres'; and
 - *Community links*: schools where the boundaries between the school and the community appear porous work to ensure that schools have grass-roots support and are well connected to local businesses and organisations, and also develop in students a sense of 'giving back' to their community.

These elements were delivered differently according to local contexts and the varying needs of the students at each site. This indicates that diversity is also key to successfully catering to disengaged young people.

2. Data cross-referenced among a variety of stakeholders (teachers, youth workers, administrators, community volunteers and students) indicate that these schools are making a significant difference in the lives of young people who were previously lost to the educational system. Without these alternative schools, it is likely that many of the young people who currently attend them would also be lost to society as well; some would be in juvenile detention; and some potentially, in their words, dead.
3. The strongest sites were supported by stable funding bodies that also provided professional development and other types of support for teachers and workers. 'Stand-alone' sites were vulnerable in terms of approaches from 'consultants' offering educational solutions that could be 'faddish'.
4. There appears to be a growing demand for alternative educational schools evidenced by increasing numbers on waiting lists at all of the schools. This is creating a situation where some of the neediest young people are still unable to access educational services.
5. Difficulties with accessing alternative educational services for young people who are excluded from/leave the system increase with geographical distance from major centres in Queensland. This is exacerbated by attendant issues in respect of transport and communication resources.

Recommendations

This report documents a range of challenges identified in the course of undertaking this research into the educational disengagement of some young people and the need to develop appropriate responses to this issue. In particular we have identified the following elements requiring consideration at a systemic level, at the level of individual schools, mainstream and alternative, in the youth and community sector and for the research community:

Systemic

- Develop a range of strategies to provide access to viable educational options for all young people in Queensland, particularly in respect of high geographical inequity in rural, remote and regional areas of the state;
- Embed more accurate tracking of students, in cooperation with stakeholders (e.g youth workers, teachers, community organisations, juvenile justice) to ensure that young people stay connected to schools and are not 'lost' to the system;
- Raise awareness among mainstream educational providers in respect of the triggers and signs of educational disengagement;
- Review mainstream schooling policies and practices, especially in relation to 'disciplinary absences', that might be barriers to the educational engagement of all young people but particularly to the most marginalised;
- Enhance awareness of theoretical debates addressing the complexities of race, gender and culture;
- Encourage schools to develop positive relationships with the youth and community sector to keep young people engaged in schooling;

- Ensure that initiatives within mainstream schools which provide material and emotional supports to vulnerable young people are adequately funded; and
- Develop a framework to assess the quality of alternative education provision.

Schools (mainstream and alternative)

- Mainstream schools need to maintain a focus on ensuring that they develop innovative, meaningful and challenging curricula to keep all students, but particularly the most vulnerable, engaged in learning;
- Ensure that quality curricula and effective pedagogical practices underpin alternative educational provision so that such centres become 'learning choices' not 'dumping grounds' or 'drop-in centres' for young people who struggle to stay connected to the mainstream;
- Make strategic use of existing community resources to address educational disadvantage and provide support for alternative and diverse learning pathways, particularly in rural, remote and regional areas of Queensland; and
- Facilitate networks of stakeholders (e.g youth workers, teachers, community organisations, juvenile justice) to support sharing of information and resources.

Youth workers and community organisations

- Youth workers and community organisations, in some locations, need to develop more trusting relationships with schools to keep young people in schooling;
- Initiate dialogue with schools about the needs of marginalised young people in the local community; and
- Continue to advocate for young people within the context of seeing education as important for young people's current and future well-being.

Research community

- Undertake further research into innovative programs that are working in mainstream schools to address the causes of educational disengagement at a school level;
- Undertake longitudinal studies of young people who have been through the alternative school sector; and
- Identify educational outcomes and mechanisms for assessing them so that the quality of alternative education provision can be determined.



Foreword

YANQ is the peak body for youth organisations and acts as an advocate for the well-being of all young people in Queensland. This is the first ARC Linkage project that YANQ has agreed to partner with and grows out of a commitment on its part to ensuring that all young people in Queensland are provided with opportunities to access meaningful education regardless of their life circumstances or location in Queensland. The current policy moment is of great interest to YANQ.

Since 2003 YANQ has been setting its own research agenda on education, based on the information gathered from its membership from across Queensland. Reengagement with education was identified by YANQ as a focus area for research and policy development. During this time there have been a number of discussion papers and research reports released by YANQ. In 2009/2010 YANQ brought the community youth sector and the researchers from The University of Queensland and Griffith University together and this collaboration resulted in the release of the report 'Reengaging Students in Education'.

The YANQ education advisory committee has acted as a reference group for this project and has provided valuable input, insights and reflections throughout the course of the study.

The lead researchers, Prof Martin Mills and Dr Glenda McGregor have demonstrated their passionate commitment to enhancing educational outcomes of all young people by patiently and tirelessly working on this challenging project.

This proactive research project was designed in response to real needs of young people identified by youth workers from across Queensland. The processes adopted by this research project nurtured a genuine partnership between universities and the youth sector as well as direct involvement of young people themselves.

The findings of this research is of significance to the youth sector as well. Staff and young people in alternative education centres have clearly stated the important role that youth workers play. The highly sophisticated skill set necessary to enable adults to establish meaningful and trusting relationships with marginalised young people is broadly misunderstood by mainstream schools. Narrowing the gap between the mainstream schools, youth agencies and the broader community will no doubt play a significant role in and maintaining and/or reengaging young people with learning.

We hope that the recommendations of this report are adopted in various settings and will assist young people in their educational pathways.

Siyavash Doostkhah
YANQ Director



Section 1: Background

This report, *Engaging students in engaging schools: Lessons from Queensland's alternative education sector*, is concerned with the ways in which young people in Queensland who have disengaged from the mainstream schooling sector have re-engaged through alternative forms of schooling. These schools provide some lessons on how to make schools engaging for those whose schooling experiences have been less than positive. However, it has also been concerned with the quality of alternative education provision and with developing a framework for creating new and assessing existing alternative schools. We have been particularly concerned with options for young people in rural and remote areas of the State, as well as in urban and regional areas.

We have been to remote locations where young people have limited access to diverse forms of schooling, and limited means of travel to attend school. We have also been to highly fashionable tourist destinations and found many young people who are living in extreme poverty and feel alienated from mainstream society. We have spoken with these young people, many who were homeless, had had traumatic lives and/or had never fully engaged with mainstream schooling. They have told us heart wrenching stories about the forms of discrimination they had faced in schools and beyond. However, many of these young people had re-engaged with education through the flexi schooling system. They also highly valued the education they were obtaining and saw it as an important pathway to improving their life opportunities. We also spoke with the teachers of these students, and with other workers in their flexi schools. These people's interviews enabled elaborations on some of the stories we were hearing and offered suggestions for removing many of the barriers to engagement with schooling that faced these young people. We also spoke with many community representatives in the locations where these schools were situated. Many of these stand out. However, one more than others. This involved a former magistrate working as a mentor in one of the schools. He spoke of how many of the young people he was now working with resembled many of those who he had in the past sentenced to incarceration. He told us how he had learnt so much from working and the school and that he now realised that he had been 'pre-judging' (literally!) many of the young people. He was now of the view that what was needed to help such young people was 'education not legislation'. This viewpoint and the accompanying rejection of deficit interpretations of the young people's particular circumstances underpins the philosophies on those schools we visited that were having the greatest success with engaging young people in education.

The report builds upon a pilot study that was conducted for YANQ in 2010¹. In that study we collected data from a small, diverse group of alternative schools in South-East Queensland. We identified some of the practices that had worked to engage marginalised young people facing very difficult life circumstances back into learning. Within these schools, the large numbers of students who, despite having rejected mainstream schooling, were prepared to make significant efforts to attend their 'alternative' school was striking. This suggested that there was something significant occurring at these schools worthy of exploring in order to facilitate the acquisition of retention targets set by various governments. However, the previous study was limited by funds and thus restricted to Queensland's South-East corner. The ARC funded project was able to build upon the pilot study on urban schools by adding remote and rural case study alternative schools that cater to the needs of some of the most marginalised young people in Queensland to the data. Funding also enabled extensive phone interviews to be carried out with workers in the youth field across the state and the implementation of surveys with young people and workers in these schools and also with some young people not in education or work.

¹ See http://www.yanq.org.au/uploads/1/4/1/7/14174316/yanq_report_final-art_press_compress.pdf

The specific aims of the project were, across a range of locations in Queensland:

- to determine principles necessary to cater to the needs of young people who have become disengaged from mainstream schooling and have become unaccounted for in continuing education, training or work;
- to explore and assess the effectiveness of alternative pathways and flexible educational options currently available for those young people who have rejected or been rejected by mainstream schooling; and
- to develop future frameworks to improve and augment existing provision of alternative pathways and flexible educational options that cater to the needs of marginalised young people.

The project was based on a number of premises determined from the literature and our own research:

- Governments at both National and State and Territory levels have sought to encourage young people to complete the senior years of schooling through various legislative and policy initiatives;
- The mainstream system can present itself as an unfriendly maze of rules and paperwork that is overwhelming to students and their parents/care givers who are often already disengaged and/or alienated from schooling processes;
- School cultures, curriculum and practices are all implicated in student disengagement and behaviour;
- Traditional teaching practices often fail to take into account what students bring to the pedagogical relationship and reasons why they might comply with or resist school practices;
- Many young people would not be in schooling if it was not for the existence of educational alternatives; and
- Alternative schooling arrangements provide young people who have been treated harshly by life, and then often had this treatment intensified in schools, with another opportunity to complete school.

Our earlier study revealed that most of the young people attending these schools had only acquired knowledge about their existence and offerings by chance. Indeed these alternative education sites were often not aware of each other's existence. This has since changed. There is now much greater awareness of the offerings of such schools, there is a greater number of them and many have waiting lists. In the pilot study it became apparent that there were a number of lessons these alternative schools could offer to mainstream schools in terms of how best to engage and support some of the most marginalised young people in their schools. We would suggest that this still remains the case.

In gathering data for this study we utilised a mixed methods approach that included surveys (including telephone surveys) and case studies. Paper surveys were undertaken with 79 workers (teachers and youth support) in 13 alternative education sites - to determine how referral processes work and to ascertain their views on the types of programs and practices that are the most effective in terms of retaining and challenging the young people; and with 154 young people undertaking education in 15 flexible education sites and programs - to determine the factors that attracted them to the sites, the practices and learning occurring at the sites that they found useful and their aspirations for the future. Thirteen telephone surveys (30-60 minutes) and sixteen on-line surveys were undertaken with key personnel from the youth sector in rural, remote and regional areas of the state. The participants for these interviews were identified in consultation with Youth Affairs Network Queensland (YANQ). These surveys helped to map existing alternative educational

providers and determine awareness of such services among professionals who work closely with disadvantaged and marginalised young people.

The case studies consisted of eight alternative education sites. Visits were conducted periodically during the course of the project. In order to ensure diversity, the selection of each site was purposive in terms of the following factors:

- Location – e.g. inner city, regional, rural, remote;
- Characteristics of young people catered for – e.g. Indigenous young people, pregnant girls and young mothers;
- Types of programs offered – e.g. Queensland curriculum, vocational certificates, literacy and numeracy skills; and
- Governance and funding – e.g. Youth services, charitable, religious or philanthropic organisations, special government assisted sites and off-site government fully funded annex models

Case study data collection methods included on-site observations and analyses of documents. Such data helped to inform the subsequent 68 semi-structured interviews with administrators, workers, teachers and community volunteers so as to provide deeper insight into our case study sites. In total, 81 young people from the case study sites were also interviewed to determine their views on: elements contributing to a high quality alternative education site; features of effective teaching practices; the intellectual challenge of their work; the meaningfulness of their work; and their aspirations for the future.

All required ethical processes were complied with. Clearances from the Human Research Ethics Committees of The University of Queensland and Griffith University were obtained. Permission was received from all gatekeepers and participants, and guardians where relevant. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants and case study sites. In some cases we have retained the names of locations mentioned in participant interviews if this did not compromise the anonymity of the participant or the site.



Section 2: Contextual issues

General context

Dead. Doing drugs. Gaol. Crime. Nothing. Hanging out in the streets. These have all been responses from young people in Queensland who have disengaged from mainstream schooling and returned to school via an alternative school when we have asked them: 'What would you be doing if you were not at this school?' Not all responses have been so vivid. In many cases the answer has been a simple, 'don't know'. These are the voices of disengaged young people who have left the mainstream schooling system, the vast majority of them from highly marginalised backgrounds. This report provides an opportunity for many of these young people's voices to be heard, along with those of their teachers and youth workers.

The issue of disengagement from schooling is a critical one for government and education departments across the world, although the full extent of the problem is often not known due to the inability of education systems to 'track' students who move between, and indeed out of, schools. However, it has been estimated that in Australia in 2014, 7 percent of 15–19 year olds were not in employment, education or training (NEET), and pointing to the durability of this issue, these percentage figures differ only slightly from those in 2005 (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare 2015). These data are also failing to capture those young people younger than 15 who have disappeared off school rolls.

The NEET data also obscure the seriousness of the issue as employment can be precarious for young people in this age bracket who are at work but who have not completed year 12 (or equivalent). The importance of school completion led to the Commonwealth government, in conjunction with the States, identifying school retention as a national priority, evident in the 'National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions' aim of lifting Year 12 retention rates to 90percent by 2015 (COAG 2009). However, recent research (Lamb et al. 2015) suggests that 26 percent of 19 year olds in Australia have not finished year 12 or received a Certificate III equivalent. The data are much worse for Indigenous students (with a 40 percent gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous 19 year olds) and for young people from the lowest SES backgrounds where the figures are at about 40 percent. The complexities of gender are also apparent with 78.5 percent of young women completing school compared to 69.5 percent of young men. Australia is not alone in regards to concerns being expressed about the large numbers of young people who have disengaged from school and the associated equity concerns about which groups form the majority of those young people in other countries (Evans, Meyer, Pinney and Robinson 2009; Martin and Brand 2006; Abrams 2010). These concerns reflect the damaging impact that a failure to complete school can have on individuals and their families, including inter-generational poverty, on social cohesion, and on the economic well-being and health of nations (OECD, 2013).

The causes of disengagement and early departure from the school system are multiple and include factors related to both young people's lives within and beyond school. The literature demonstrates that many of the factors affecting disengagement interconnect and include: poverty, gender, Indigeneity, family circumstances (including family conflict, caring responsibilities, pregnancy and lack of parental resources), transience or residential mobility, experiences of trauma, mental health issues, substance abuse, homelessness, school refusal/ anxiety, social dislocation, and disability. At the same time a number of school-based factors intersect with these out-of-school factors to construct cycles of disadvantage. International literature, in accordance with our own work, indicates that these include lack of attendance and achievement, various school policies that do not take account of young people's complex lives, curricula and pedagogical practices that fail to engage young people and poor sets of relationships between students and between students and staff (see for example, Apple, 2013; Hayes, Mills et al., 2006; Smyth and Hattam, 2004; Quinn et al., 2006; te

Riele, 2007; Wishart et al., 2006; McGregor, 2009; Gable et al., 2006; Smyth and Fasoli, 2007; Thomson, 2002).

In the UK, in a study for the Barnardo's organisation in response to new government legislation requiring all young people to be in education, employment or training, Evans, et al. (2009) identified 'inside school' factors as the main reasons for students disengaging from education. Bullying is also tied into the types of relationships that students have with each other and is also clearly an in-school trigger for disengagement (Evans, et al., 2009; Mills and McGregor, 2014). School responses to behavioural issues also have an impact. It is apparent that a major cause of leaving the system is being excluded or suspended from school (Ogg and Kaill, 2010; Evan et al., 2009). Our own research (e.g. Mills and McGregor, 2014; McGregor and Mills, 2012) and our professional work with teachers, indicate that many teachers are very well aware of these issues, however, they feel constrained by the system.

When the groups that disengage from schooling are considered, the topic reveals itself as a broad issue of social justice. Data provided by the Organisation of Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD) demonstrate a strong relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and school completion (OECD, 2013). As previously indicated, the vast majority of young people who do not complete school come from low income families, disrupted family structures and arrangements, and/or Indigenous backgrounds, and have disengaged for gender specific reasons (e.g. boys as a result of exclusion for violent behaviours or girls as a consequence of becoming pregnant). However, in developing responses it is important to acknowledge, as does Loutzenheiser (2002, p.461), that:

The reasons that students disconnect or reconnect with schooling cannot be boiled down to a single, neat package or list of alterations. Neither ethnic nor racial identity, life experience, or schooling encounters alone *caused* students to disconnect or reconnect. A confluence of factors related to identity, personal experience, school, family, and community played parts in these processes—even different and intersecting parts depending on the student.

Contained within many policy responses to student disengagement are two main foci: changing students (e.g. remediation, therapies) or changing schools (e.g. environment, curricula and pedagogy) including systems of schooling (e.g. alternative structures and streams). In our own work (Mills and McGregor, 2014), evidence suggests changing schools and schooling structures have a greater impact than focusing on changing individual students in isolation, although young people's personal circumstances clearly matter. The most successful responses to this problem appear to have occurred in those schools, educational centres and programs that have worked to address the individual causes of disengagement holistically within a framework of school change. Aron (2006, 3) for example, emphasises the need for interagency co-operation with schools, "child protective service systems, the juvenile justice system, and a variety of health and human service agencies, such as mental health and substance abuse treatment agencies, crisis intervention centres, runaway and homeless youth shelters". The necessity for comprehensive support service choices as educationally enabling supports for young people has been identified in numerous studies (see for example, Hayes, 2012; Aron and Zweig, 2003; Black et al., 2010; te Riele, 2009; Kemmis, 2000).

Improving the quality of classrooms via high quality pedagogies is also critical (e.g. Hayes et al., 2006). We would suggest that this is also important for alternative schools in Queensland. In Darling-Hammond and Friedlander's (2007) research with five Californian high schools with predominantly African-American students from families of low income backgrounds in which 80 to 100 percent of the students went on to higher education, a rate considered to be twice the State average, there was a strong focus on the intellectual quality of the work, relevant and meaningful curricula, and the citizenship goals of schooling. Lamb and Rice (2008) also argue that providing tasks with 'immediate, tangible benefits' is important to successful strategies because young people at risk of disengagement often do not have a sense of the future or have any kind of plan for achieving a long-

term goal. They go on to indicate that school climates where tensions exist between students and where young people do not have good relationships with teachers are also factors in disengagement (see also Smyth and Fasoli, 2007; Kemmis, 2000). Lamb and Rice (2008), in their discussion of effective strategies for preventing students from ‘dropping out’ of school, also argued that the most effective initiatives fostered connectedness between the young person and people beyond their immediate family, both within the school and the broader community. These practical supports may well be vital for the health and well-being of young people and their families, and these extra services ameliorate the effects of poverty, social exclusion, neglect and abuse (for example, racism, homophobia) in the local community.

The seriousness of the issues related to disengagement from schooling, the impact on the individuals concerned and their families, and society more generally are such that alternatives have to be considered and imagined. Fielding and Moss (2011, p.16) have argued for ‘more case studies of possibility, opportunities to enrich our imagination and vocabulary about schooling’. This is the task that was taken up in this research on alternative education in Queensland. We hope that the findings presented here in this report will serve to highlight various organisational strategies and resources necessary for schools - alternative *or* mainstream - to support highly marginalised young people staying in or returning to education.

Queensland context

In Queensland there has also been an expressed support for alternative education provision. Most notably the government provides state based funding to what are called Special Assistance Schools. These schools are run by independent providers, and consequently sit within the independent schooling sector. They are therefore expected to meet a set of criteria that ensures that highly disadvantaged students receive an education. For example, they are not permitted to charge school fees and they must have flexible and specific accredited educational programs to re-engage young people in learning and develop sustainable learning and employment pathways. There are growing numbers of these schools in Queensland. Some of the schools in this report, however, have not qualified or been registered yet as an SAS and others are attached to a mainstream government school.



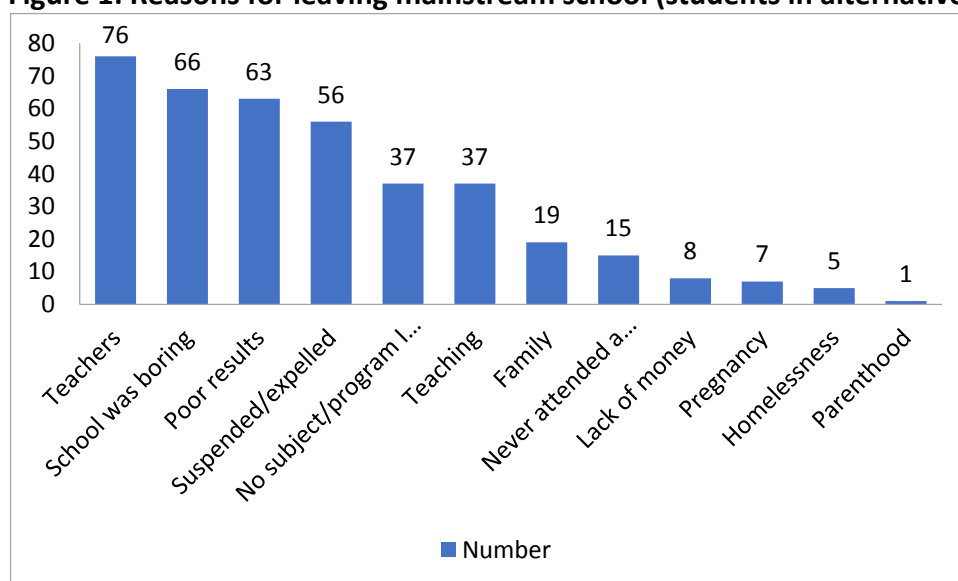
Section 3: Exiting the mainstream – reasons and destinations

In this section of the report we are concerned with why young people leave the mainstream schooling system, who it is that leaves and why they then make the choice to return to an alternative school. Here we focus on the survey and phone interview data to give a broad overview of key issues related to this topic. (The case studies in the following section provide a more fine grained account of these issues.) Young people in 15 alternative education sites across Queensland were surveyed. A total of 154 surveys were returned. Through contacts in the youth sector 38 young people not in any form of education or work were encouraged to complete the surveys. Many of these young people were contacted through youth services in rural, remote and regional areas. A total of 36 surveys of young people not in education were returned. There were 79 surveys returned from workers in 13 alternative sites and included: teachers, youth workers, merged teacher/youth worker roles and teacher aides. Only 16 paper surveys were returned from youth workers across Queensland. Because of the size of our survey samples, we do not suggest that the data derived from them are quantitatively representative of the various groups, particularly young people from this demographic. For example, accessing young people who are not in any form of education, training or employment is extremely problematic and we consider it fortunate that we were able to receive 36 replies to our survey requests. The value of the survey data lies in their triangulated support for our findings from extensive qualitative data derived from our case study sites and telephone interviews with youth workers across the state.

Reasons for leaving

On the surveys completed by young people currently attending an alternative education site, the vast majority indicated that their reasons for leaving the mainstream were school based, and included: teacher (50%), school was boring (43%) and poor school results (41%) (See Figure 1²). Recognising that many factors interrelate, young people were not forced to choose only one reason but to indicate as many of the reasons that applied to them for their departure from the mainstream. Students could also provide statements in addition to the fixed survey items. Along with not fitting in with the expectations of mainstream schooling, many of these related to mental health issues (anxiety and depression), bullying and to look for work.

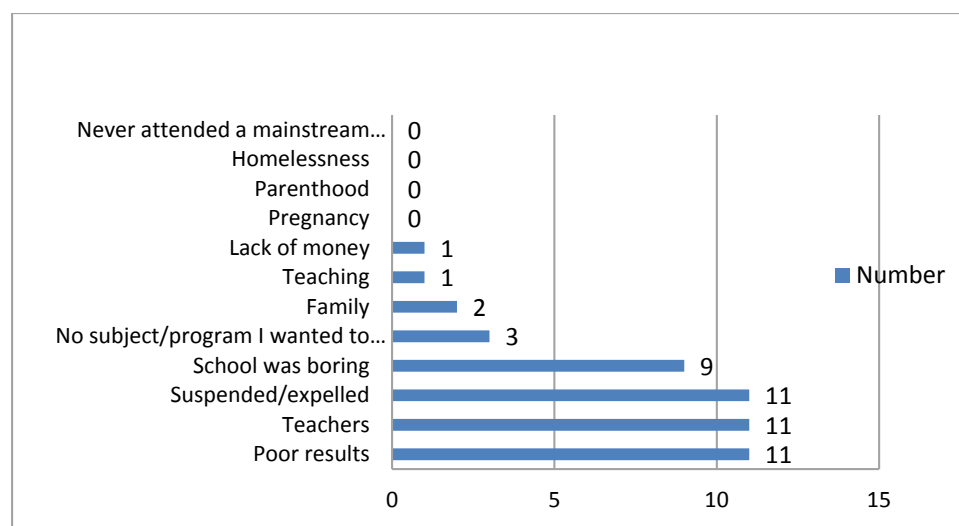
Figure 1: Reasons for leaving mainstream school (students in alternative schools)



² Tabular representations of all figures are in Appendix 1

The stories of the young people who were not in any form of education or work reflected the experiences of young people in alternative settings. When asked why they had left school the reasons overwhelmingly related to schooling factors: teacher (30%), poor school results (30%), and suspension (30%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Reasons for leaving school (students not in any form of education)

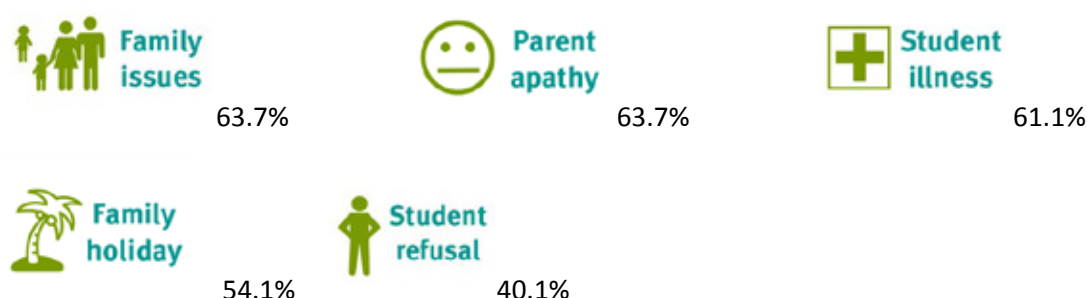


When asked for other reasons, the young people indicated these included: bullying (3), drugs (1) and fights (1).

Interestingly, in a 2015 Department of Education and training (DET) online survey with 157 school leaders from primary and secondary schools across Queensland, a very different set of reasons for student non-attendance were given. The key question asked was: 'In your opinion, what are the five (5) main causes of non-attendance at this school, for those students with a history of poor attendance?' Because respondents were able to select up to five main causes (from a list of 17 different options) the results add to more than 100 per cent. They could also cite additional reasons.

Perceived main causes of non-attendance: DET 2015 survey with school leaders

Top five perceived main causes of non-attendance for students with a history of poor attendance, for all respondents and by school type



For all school types, the five most commonly cited reasons for the non-attendance of students with a history of poor attendance

(DET, 2016, p. 4)

In contrast to the data generated by our research, there is a striking absence of in-school factors cited in connection with student non-attendance. The following graph taken from the report shows a strong disconnect between the problem of schooling disengagement and what happens at school:

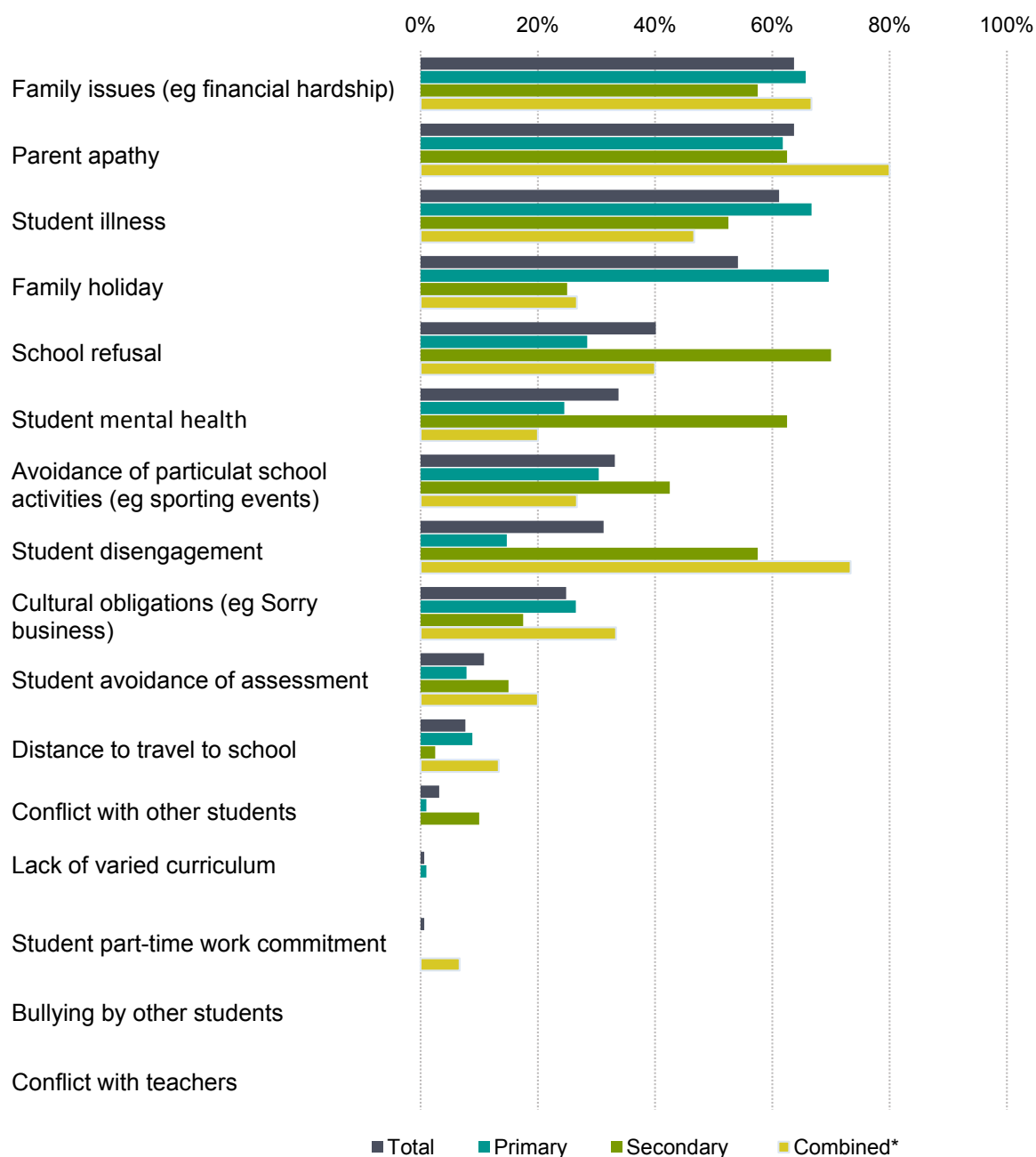


Figure 1: Perceived main causes of non-attendance for students with a history of poor attendance, for all respondents and by school type (DET, 2016, p. 5).

It is extraordinary that the school leaders failed to cite bullying and conflict with teachers at all as causes of absenteeism. Equally telling is the fact that whenever schooling factors are cited, they are couched in terms of student deficit, e.g: 'student avoidance', 'student disengagement', 'school refusal' and so on. These contrast significantly with our interviews with the youth sector. They suggested that schools were often too isolationist and were not always prepared to accept support from services outside education. This meant that young people could be lost from the system. One

manager of a major youth service in a remote area of Queensland was particularly critical of schools in the local area in relation to such isolationism. He had a sense that schools did not want to work with outside organisations. He claimed to have been trying to have conversations with local schools for many years:

And I have always stated to them as a youth organisation, 'Let us help you to engage your young people back in school. Because you know what, youth workers, youth agencies - it's a key partnership in making sure that that occurs'. What we are finding out and what I am trying to work hard with education is, the lower grade, secondary school-age kids. We are finding a lot of young people just staying at home, not being encouraged to go to school and constantly just walking the streets during the day... It's very, very hard - I stress that; I will underline it, bold it for you - in terms of having some professional conversations with the department. They tend to sweep the issue under the carpet more so than try to address it or work collaboratively with agencies/organisations to address the issue.

He went on to say:

I have been working with them for five years. I send out yearly emails to all the principals saying, '(youth organisation) is here, if you need us', and none of them contact me back or even want to acknowledge that we are here. You know, it's an uphill battle. I feel it needs to be at a more executive level to influence principals and the likes of local office here, to put that change in place.

This was a story that was echoed across the state. In an urban area we were told by the manager of a Youth Connections program³ that they had tried working with schools to support young people who were facing exclusion from school.

We have so few referrals from the school system, at the point of them being excluded. We have tried to say to them, 'Can you include Youth Connections in your process, when you are ringing up the parent/family or the young person to say, 'you are about to be excluded. Would you like us to give your details to a Youth Connections as a support?' - We don't get that. And they can't do it and they haven't done it. Consequently, we are getting young people that get excluded, that somehow find their way to us through another agency... So I think there's always been a real gap and we have never been able to bridge it, despite trying to, for a period of time, in terms of - for a long time, with Education to say, 'Refer these people straight away, so that they don't get lost.

These school based factors align with other research indicated in the literature section of this report. However, it was apparent from our telephone interviews with youth workers in rural and remote locations that while these school based factors applied to young people in those areas, there were a number of geographical specific factors that presented a range of other challenges. We address this in the next section of the report.

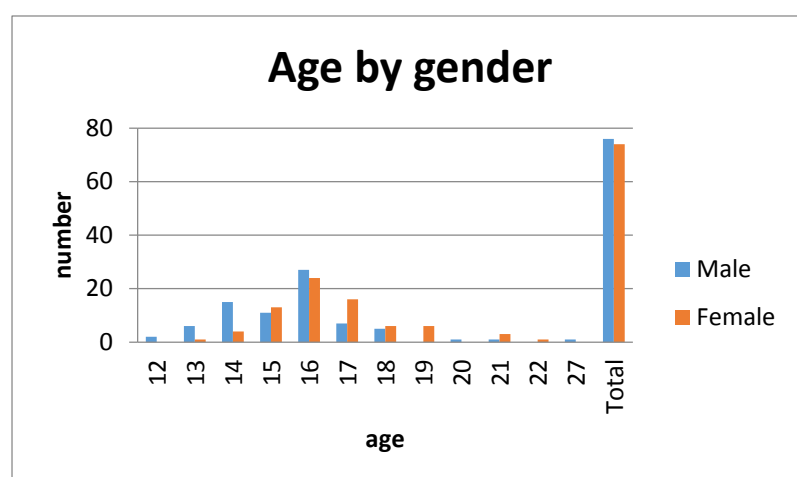
Who is leaving the mainstream?

Previous research has clearly identified marginalised groups (people living in poverty, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Pacific Islanders, pregnant girls, and non-traditional gender identities) as being most disadvantaged by current schooling practices (Abrams 2010; Finlay et al. 2010; Kane 2011; Mosen-Lowe et al. 2009; Savelsberg and Martin-Giles 2008; Smyth and Hattam 2004; Vincent and Thomson 2013).

³ This national youth support program was cut in the May 2014 Budget

Of the 154 surveys returned from the 15 alternative education sites across Queensland were surveyed, 76 were male, 74 were female (not every item elicited a response from the young people) and the age range was between 12 and 27 years old, Figure 3 shows the distribution of ages for male and females. There is a mean age of 16 years old for all, it is 16 years old for males and 17 for females (see Table 3 Appendix)

Figure 3: Age and gender: young people in alternative schools



Most of those surveyed were born in English speaking countries, only two were born in non-English Speaking countries, with one in the Cook Islands and one in Finland. Eight people indicated that they spoke another language at home, those were Cook Island language, Maori, Niuean, Samoan, Finnish and German, and one used sign language. There were a small number (11) who identified as Aboriginal (7.43%) and Torres Strait Islanders, in a total number of 13 (8.78%). The presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is significant when considering their proportion in the whole population. At the time of the survey, 88 percent lived with their families. Two identified as homeless, one in shelter, one was in youth accommodation, another in a refuge, and those staying with friends, the number of people who may be counted officially as homelessness as defined by Australian government can be high (15/149) (NB - couch surfing, rooming and living in a shelter, or youth accommodation can be counted as homeless. Rough sleeping is in the first category).

Of the 36 completed surveys of young people not in education, 17 were male, 19 were female. The age range was between 13 and 24 years old, with a mean age of 16 years old. There was little difference amongst males (15.8) and females (16.0). Almost all of those surveyed were born in Australia (with one not applicable) and almost all (34/36, with one not applicable) indicated that the main language spoken at home was English, only one indicated that a combination of Torres Strait Island and an Aboriginal language were spoken at home. Fifteen people identified as Aboriginal (41.67%), and 4 (11.11%) as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. In a total, 19 people identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, their presence amongst this group was very high (more than half of the participants). While it is important to be mindful of the sample size of the survey, such data support evidence indicating that many mainstream Australian schools fail to cater to the needs of Indigenous students (see for example, Shay and Heck 2015). At the time of the survey, 27 people (75%) were living with their families. Four people were living with friends, two in a shelter, one was independent, and one was homeless. There was no one in foster care.

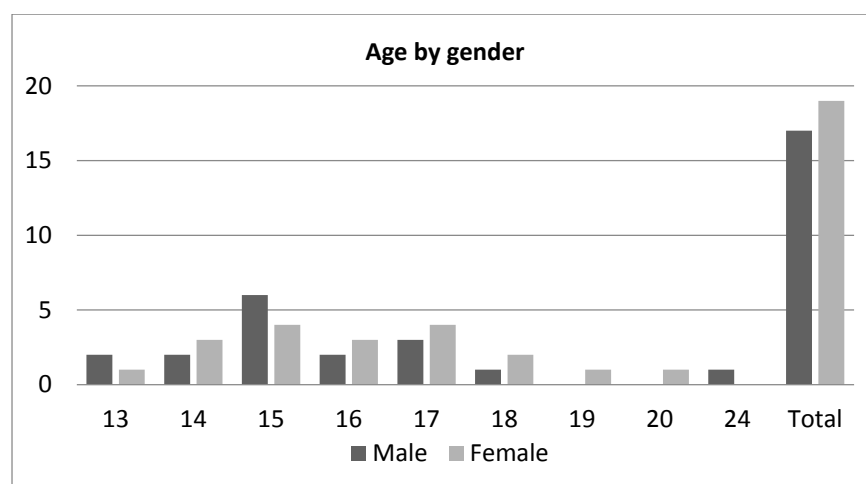
One factor that we would like to stress here is age. The age at which some young people were leaving the mainstream was striking. Of those attending an alternative site, over 66% were 16 or under and included both 12 and 13 year olds (Table 1).

Table 1: Age and gender of survey respondents in alternative education

Age	Male	Female	Total
12	2	0	2
13	6	1	7
14	15	4	19
15	11	13	24
16	27	24	51
17	7	16	23
18	5	6	11
19	0	6	6
20	1	0	1
21	1	3	4
22	0	1	1
27	1	0	1
Total	76	74	150

In relation to those who were not in any form of education, the age of these young people does raise important questions about school retention. Half of those surveyed (18) were 15 or under. School retention policies were clearly not working for these young people (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Age and gender of survey respondents not in any form of education



These figures are of course only providing a brief snapshot and require much more investigation. However, identifying young people who have dropped out of education, training or employment completely is a difficult process. Thus they are a notoriously difficult population to reach for research purposes. The manager of a youth connections program informed us that they did work with a lot of young people in this situation, ranging in age from 12 to 20, although the majority of the young people were 15 or older. She informed us that most of these had ‘fallen out of mainstream settings’, although some had even dropped out of a flexi school setting. The efforts of this organisation were

aimed at finding a flexi school setting for these young people as they felt there were more supports for the students there. However, what she was most concerned about was hearing more and more often that 'schools are putting pressure on students to leave rather than get suspended or excluded.' She said that they were now enrolling students in their programs who had 'agreed to go' from their previous school.

The CEO of a flexible school in a built up coastal area told us that a lot of their students had been out of the school system for a long time. She informed us that these students are 'hard to find' as 'they are the ones that are sitting at home with extreme anxiety, that don't leave the house. So they are already under the radar, the schools don't even know they exist.' She told us that the local youth connections program had been central to finding these students and to getting them 'back into the land of the living.' She went on to say, 'There's at least 1500 kids in this city that are not engaged in school, in the compulsory phase, who aren't doing anything; there's a whole bunch of them.' She told us that the school currently had a waitlist of 200 students who were in this position and that is growing all the time.

Charlotte, the Coordinator of a youth program in a regional city, was highly concerned about the problem of young people not in any form of education or work: 'Probably across the State of Queensland there would be at least in the vicinity of 10,000 youth that are not engaged in that earn/learn or working'. Sustained and in-depth research on this group of 'disappeared' young people is required.

Reasons for choosing an alternative school – students

One aspect of our research that was of great interest was the enthusiasm that many young people in alternative education had for their current school. This contrasted greatly with the views they held of their previous school(s). It was apparent that many of these young people still valued education. This is still the case for large numbers of those in alternative education. For instance, the survey item concerned with why young people attended the alternative site would seem to indicate that they are interested in pursuing an education in both vocational and common academic areas. They indicated that their return to education was prompted by a desire to attend courses for work qualification (53%) and to attend courses in normal school subjects (41%). They also attended for social reasons (32%). It is perhaps no surprise that social reasons were also highlighted, schools are a major place where young people congregate and they fulfil an important social need for young people (Table 2).

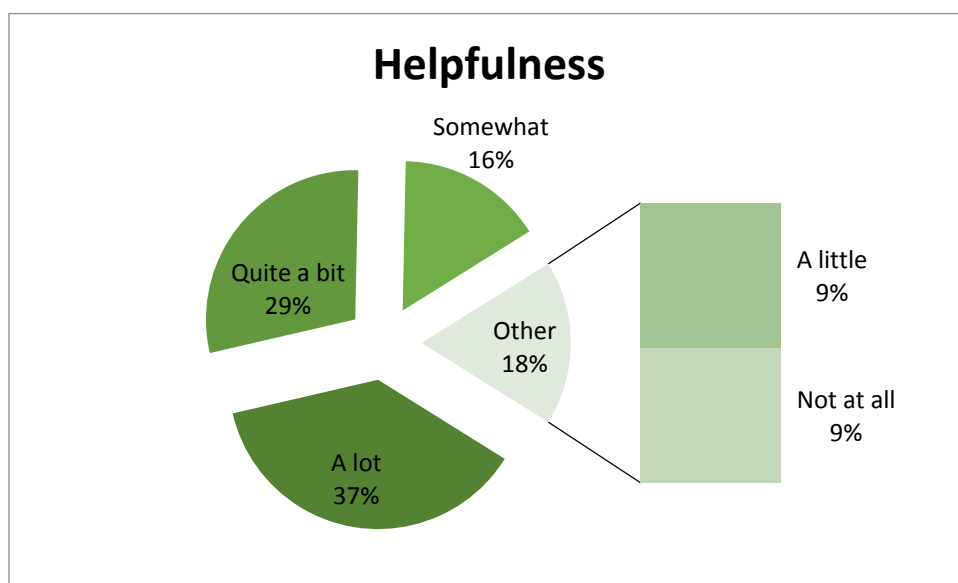
Table 2: Reasons for attending an alternative site (students in alternative education)

Reasons to attend	No.	%	Total
To attend courses for work qualifications	80	53%	151
To attend courses in normal school subjects	62	41%	151
Social reasons	48	32%	151
Teaching quality	40	26%	151
Relationship with workers	31	21%	151
No choice	28	19%	151

To participate in specialist program	25	17%	151
To access child care	10	7%	151
To participate in counselling	9	6%	151
For meals	9	6%	151
Pregnancy help	7	5%	151
To access transportation	6	4%	151
To access housing support	5	3%	151
To access legal aid	2	1%	151

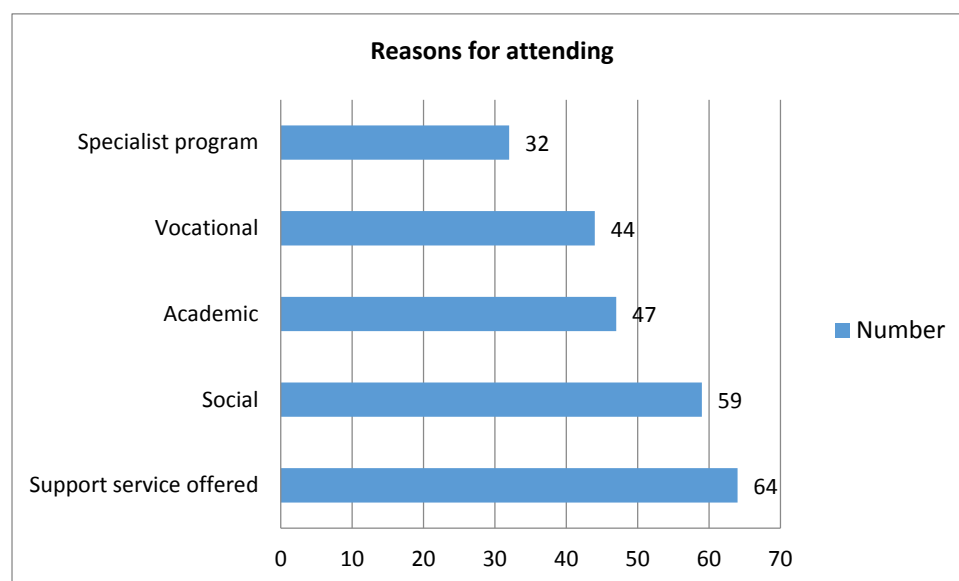
The majority had high satisfaction levels with their alternative education and with the help that they received. When asked about the extent to which the school was helping them meet their goals (which included university degrees, various arts like guitarist and photographer, hairdressers and zoo keepers) more than 60% commented that the help was either 'a lot' or 'quite a bit' (see Figure 5)

Figure 5: Perceived extent to which alternative site was helping young people achieve goals



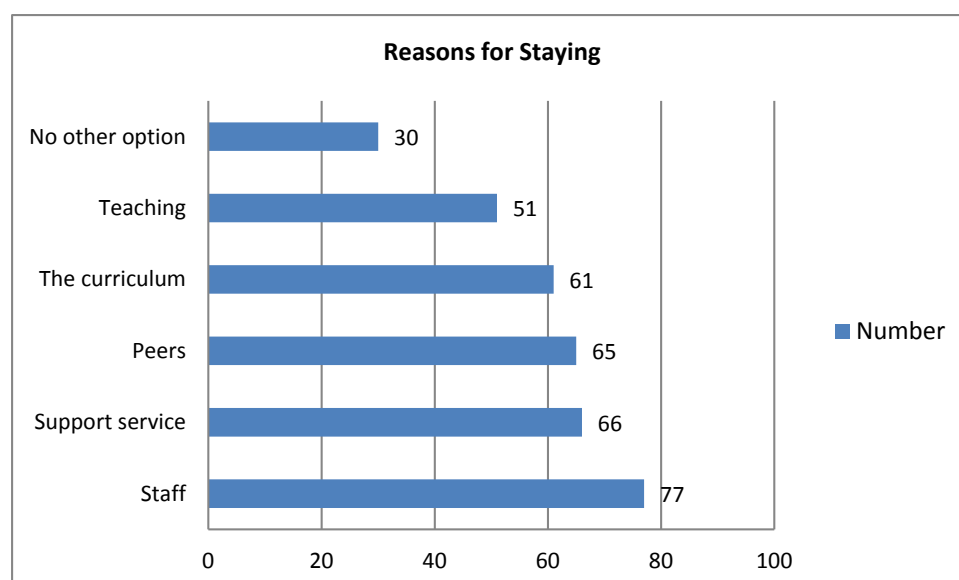
Whilst amongst the young people surveyed, the support services offered by the alternative sites was not a prominent reason for attending the school, a majority of the workers in alternative education indicated that students attended their alternatives sites because of the support services that they offered (81%), along with social reasons (75%) (See Figure 6 Reasons for attending).

Figure 6 Reasons for attending according to workers



This perhaps suggests that the various approaches that many of the alternative schools provide in terms of ‘clearing the path for learning’ do ensure that some students are able to re-enter the schooling system and stay there. Staff, support services, and peers were the top three reasons staff considered critical in keeping the students at school (see Figure 7 Reasons for staying).

Figure 7 Reasons for staying according to workers



The workers in these schools were also asked to indicate whether or not they agreed with a range of statements (see Table 3). As perhaps to be expected from people who work in these sites there was strong agreement that such sites are necessary, that there are not enough of them and that they should be better supported. For example, the workers were unanimous (100%) in their view that there was a need for alternative education, and 95 percent considered that that there was not

enough alternative education in Queensland. Whilst not surprising, this does point to the view that there is a sense of the mainstream having failed many young people in this sector.

However, there is clearly some division on whether or not these alternative sites should be concerned with returning young people to the mainstream or whether the mainstream should become more like them. This is a difficult issue and one that is best answered in relation to the quality of the alternative site and to the pathways it offers.

Table 3: Agreement statements: Workers in alternative sites

Agreement statement	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
Alternative sites should provide a real alternative with no need for students to return to the mainstream sector.	52	20	6
Alternative sites should prepare students to return to the mainstream	26	23	30
Alternative sites should be supported more by government	78	1	0
The functions of alternative sites should be performed in mainstream schools	26	28	25
There is no need for alternative sites	0	0	79
There are not enough alternative sites in Queensland	75	4	0

That mainstream schools also seem to value the work of the alternative sector could also be inferred from the surveys completed by young people in alternative schools. Approximately a third indicated that they had been referred by their mainstream school to their current alternative school (Table 4). The reason for this also requires further investigation and the tension between mainstream schools abrogating their responsibility to these young people and the extent to which they are supporting them on a different pathway requires exploration.

Table 4: How were you referred to the alternative education site?

Referral	Number	Percent	Total
Youth/Social worker recommendation	50	32	154
Friends	33	21.43	154
Personal Search	11	7.14	154
Family	36	25.38	154
School Referral	56	36.36	154
Juvenile Justice	5	3.25	154

In the surveys of those who were not in any form of schooling, 25 people (69%) indicated that they would like to attend an alternative school, whilst only 10 (27%) said they would not. For those who

would like to attend an alternative school, their purposes were getting a qualification for a job (44%), finishing high school (36%), following up on personal interests (19%), and getting entry to university (11%). Greater in-depth interviews with those who would like to return to school but have not done so are required to understand this issue.

Paper surveys were conducted with youth workers across Queensland. However, the response rate was low (16 returns). The responses though do give some indication of the importance of the alternative school sector to their work. The vast majority (13) have been involved in referring young people to an alternative education site. The major reasons for these referrals were that the young person was not in any form of education (81% of cases), disengaged from the mainstream school (81% of cases), and behaviour at school was a concern (56% of cases). There was strong agreement amongst these youth workers that there was a need for the service. All disagreed that there is no need for such providers. The majority of the respondents (11/16) considered that these sites should provide a real alternative education with no need for the students to return to the mainstream school. And all agreed that they should be supported more by the governments. Again, while the sample size is small, these data indicate the close relationship that many in the youth sector have with the alternative school sector. We would suggest as does the literature (see McGregor, 2015) that this is a strong success factor with schools and one that requires consideration in relation to all schools.

A note on workers in alternative schools

This research project has not had a focus on workers in the alternative sector. However, in this project and others we have been involved in recently we have spoken to many teachers and workers in alternative sites who have told us stories of their own departure from the mainstream; who have actively sought to work in such places because of the satisfaction they have gained because they have been able to escape mainstream constraints upon their professional practices; and because they have rediscovered the reasons that drew them to the profession in the first place, chief of which was to 'make a difference' in the lives of their students (see McGregor and Mills, 2012) and because they feel a cultural commitment, as in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, who want to support struggling young people from their community (Shay and Heck, 2015). It is our view that a separate project is required to investigate biographies, conditions, professional development, work practices and support for staff in these schools. However, the paper surveys with workers in Queensland alternative education sites also provide some interesting details about the workforce that are worth noting here. A total number of 79 surveys were returned from workers in 13 alternative sites. These people consisted of teachers, youth workers, merged teacher/youth worker roles and teacher aides. Most had a formal teacher or youth worker qualification, qualified teachers (78%) and youth workers (85%). A significant number of these people had only worked in the sector for a year or less (25), another large group (34) had worked for over a year up to 3 years and there was another group (19) that had worked for over 3 years. This does point to an issue of experience and perhaps indicates a high turnover in some sites.

Some of the high turnover might well relate to a sense of job security. The funding for these schools came from diverse and usually a combination of sources, including state and Federal funding, charities, religious organisations and philanthropists. As a consequence not everybody felt the funding was secure. Table 5 below indicates that of the 78 workers who completed this item on the survey approximately 44% felt that funding for their site was either not very or not at all secure whereas only approximately 23% felt their funding was secure or very secure.

Table 5 Security of funding

Funding Security	Number	Percent	Total
Not at all secure	18	23.08	78
Not very secure	16	20.51	78
Somewhat secure	26	33.33	78
Secure	8	10.26	78
Very secure	10	12.82	78

Conclusions

A recurrent theme from the four surveys seems that both students and workers were content with and grateful for the provision of alternative education or programs, and saw it as an indispensable part of the education system. However, as with other data, there appears to be a strong view that it was school based factors that drove these young people from the education system. This is not to suggest that there are not people in the mainstream who care about these students nor that there are no programs in place in many schools to support young people likely to disengage from the mainstream. Rather, it is to suggest that in many cases there is not a great deal of fit between the expectations of the mainstream and the lived realities of some of these young people.

We are of the view that creating, developing and enhancing relationships with the youth sector can bring benefits to those in the mainstream who are the verge of departure or being excluded from that system. Again we would suggest that there are some schools that are doing this well. However, this does not appear to be happening in all schools. One of the schools in the study speaks of the need to ‘clear the path for learning’, we would suggest that this is a critical support that the alternative schools in the study provided to the young people. The barriers to them coming and staying at school were addressed as an educational matter not as something that was beyond the remit of schooling.

Existing evidence demonstrating the lack of cultural sensitivity in the structural organisation of schools in relation to the needs of many Indigenous students also appears to be supported through the number of such young people completing the survey. There are well documented issues in relation to the mainstream’s ability or willingness to meet the needs of Indigenous students, and we would suggest that unless the system develops appropriate responses to these needs that there will be more young Indigenous people turning to alternative schools for their education. Indeed we would suggest that there is much that the mainstream can learn from the ways in which these schools operate for Indigenous young people (see Sections 5 and 6 this report; see also Shay and Heck, 2015).

We would also suggest that consideration has to be given to the age in which young people are departing from the mainstream. We heard on a regular basis that younger and younger people are leaving the mainstream. This has not been verified. However, alternative schools are clearly enrolling young people in the compulsory years of schooling. This does have an impact upon the programs they offer and the nature of their organisation. This is an issue that is currently confronting many within the alternative education sector.

This raises what we see as a key issue in the research, and on which we sought survey respondents' opinions: the extent to which the alternative school sector presents a 'real alternative' or as a substitute for the mainstream. At this stage we are of the view that these schools currently meet the needs of the most marginalised in the community and that they have become a real necessity *because* of the current system of schooling. However, it is also our view that these schools could, in some cases, represent a first choice for students and not just those who are struggling with the mainstream. There are elements of these schools, as we indicate in the case study sections of the report, which if implemented in the mainstream, could improve schooling *all* students.

The surveys, as with other aspects of this research, raised two important considerations for further research. The first relates to hard to find young people, those who have disappeared off school rolls and are no longer in any form of schooling. These young people clearly exist. Questions have to be asked in relation to who they are, where they are and how can they be supported to receive an education. There is also a need to explore the issue of workers in these schools in much greater detail. To date much of the research focus has been on the students and the services the schools provide. However, as we indicate in this the quality of teaching and supports provided to teachers matter. In order to know the needs of the workers in the sector there is a need to know who is teaching in it.



Section 4: Regional, rural and remote challenges

As indicated in the introduction this report we sought to extend our concerns with young people in rural and remote areas and the schooling options available to them. As one means of doing this we undertook telephone surveys with 14 youth workers across Queensland. Here we present some of the key perspectives that emerged from these conversations. We do not suggest that this relatively small sample is representative of all such personnel across the state, however, the views expressed independently corroborated each other. There is also a significant literature base which indicates similar issues facing young people in rural areas in many industrialised nations, including Australia (see for example, Kenway, Kraack and Hickey-Moody, 2006; Pini, Molestane and Mills, 2014). Due to length considerations, in this section, we have chosen representative data from our sample. Here we identify some of the broad issues facing young people marginalised from the education system in rural, regional and remote areas of Queensland. Sections 5 and 7 provide a more detailed account from the perspectives of young people in such areas.

Lack of schooling choices

In urban areas of Queensland, when issues of disengagement arise, there is usually a range of other educational options that are available to young people. However, this is not the case in most rural and remote areas where, typically, there is only one government high school. Private educational options in non-urban regions are beyond the finances of those who are most likely to become disengaged from school. Nancy, a Social Worker in a far western town noted some of the issues with schools in her local area:

I find that once you start slipping behind in your attendance or your grades, it becomes really easy to then drop out and there's not a lot of follow up in my experience with where these young people end up. But mostly it could be maybe a suspension and then just not encouraged to go back and there's quite a lot of that. Our young people are also quite transient. They do fall through the cracks that way.

Charlotte, coordinator of a youth program in a regional city also noted similar problems:

Often we have found young people have been excluded from being able to get back into schools, despite us talking blue in the face that we are there and we will support the young person to strengthen their engagement at the school and strengthen their academic or educational outcomes. Often the schools don't want to hear of it, which is particularly tricky for a young person that lives in a regional centre.

Comments such as these indicate the importance of the youth sector and the schooling sector working together to address the issue of disengagement from mainstream schools in rural, regional and remote areas of Queensland. They also highlight the problem in these areas of finding viable alternatives to the mainstream.

However, in addition to a lack of mainstream schooling options, there are also very few alternative schools and/or services for young people who have left their mainstream school in these areas. This makes it highly unlikely that a young person who has left the mainstream will return to education. A Social Worker in another far west town noted how in the two towns that she had worked in there were no alternative schools and that this was common in the region:

There is nothing there and that's pretty much across our whole region. What we do have is the visiting TAFE but that is two days a week and that is very strict, in that you have an entry requirement, obviously, and it's based on improving literacy/numeracy. If you have finished

with your school and are looking to maybe do 11/12 and if your literacy/numeracy is quite reasonable, you wouldn't then be eligible for the program.

Linda, who managed a major youth program in a rural town, was also concerned about the lack of youth services in her local community:

But, honestly, in this community, there's nowhere else for them to go. I know the council are trying to get a youth hub going and we do have a PCYC here now, but it doesn't tend to be, at this stage, for disengaged youth. It is like a sporting complex.

We were also made aware that even where there were alternative education sites in non-urban areas, they often had waiting lists which meant that these schools could also be 'choosy' in who they took. It was suggested to us that there was a new underclass in the town of young people who were seen as not being 'even good' enough for the flexi school.

Transport problems

In rural and remote areas of Queensland, transport to and from school is a critical issue. Unless young people live in the regional centre, travel in and out of that centre is highly dependent on one's own resources or upon very limited public (or publically available but privately owned) transport. Falling foul of the local transport company could have dire consequences for those without their own means of getting to and from school. A Youth Development Officer in a council in a remote area indicated that the bus company played a major role in determining who could get to school:

There is the problem of catching the bus, and the bus company doesn't always allow, if we look at the majority of people disengaged from school, it would be the sort of clientele that the bus company wouldn't allow on their bus.

Sharon, Manager Neighborhood Youth Centre in a small mining town, noted how the transport problem was severe for all students who lived some way from the high schools, but that it was particularly difficult for students who had behavioural problems:

So you can go to primary school out at the gemfields but then every one of those kids who live out there, once they go into Grade 8, they have to get on the bus and come in. But if you have got behavioural problems, the bus driver can cancel you off the bus, so therefore you can't go to school. .. Some of them get on the bus at quarter to 7 every morning, so therefore some of them don't get home until quarter to 5. So it's a very big day for some of these kids; and sometimes they can't even get on it.

One person indicated that in her rural sector they had programs for disengaged young people, however, transport problems often stopped them from being able to attend: 'So they have got to do a deal with the bus driver. Sometimes the bus driver will let them on and sometimes he won't. So it's quite sporadic'.

Again we are drawn to the ways in which the problem of disaffection with the education system in rural and remote areas requires a whole community approach, including commitment and input. In many of the urban and major regional case study sites we discuss in the next section of the report, they had their own buses to ensure that the young people were able to attend school or there were numerous public transport options for young people to be able to travel great distances to their schools. How to provide such options for young people wanting to attend any form of education has to be addressed in regional, rural and remote areas.

Changing rural economies

Whilst allowing for the varying circumstances of different social groups, research indicates that, generally, rural and remote regions of Australia experience greater levels of social and economic disadvantage than urban areas (Tonts and Larsen, 2002). Droughts and changing economic models in the mining industry have exacerbated this situation, albeit quite differently. For example, problems within primary industries have flow-on effects for small towns leading to downward economic spirals as businesses close, employment opportunities decrease and young people leave to find work in the towns and cities.

Local economic conditions have specific consequences for young people in relation to their future prospects in the labour markets. Nancy, a Social Worker in a far western town, working with the Youth Connections program noted a direct connection with young people's engagement with schooling: 'In [this town] looking for employment is also very difficult because there's not a lot (of work) for an unskilled young person who doesn't have access to transport at the moment'.

Sharon, the Manager of a Neighborhood Youth Centre, in another western Queensland town, also commented on changes in the mining industry and the impact of those changes not only on jobs in the mines but also local on retail outlets:

Now there's been a downturn in the mine, everything has been affected. We have had problems with rain and drought and things like that, so that [the mining downturn] has also been another factor. Therefore, even the kids who might have worked in - like retail, Woolworths or your Supercheaps and stuff like that, have been affected because there's not as many of those jobs around at the moment, either.

Sharp downturns in the economy in any of the rural areas or in communities heavily dependent on one industry always have consequences for schools. This can relate to the number of enrollments fluctuating enormously and to changing the composition of the student body. However, in many cases it is the young people from the most marginalised family backgrounds who are going to suffer from negative changes in the labour market. How these young people are supported has a significant impact upon their engagement with schooling.

The changed economic model of the Queensland mining sector, with its new reliance on fly-in/fly-out workers, has created forms of lifestyle disruption for families which impact upon the education of children in those families. For example, Sharon pointed to the "lifestyle roster" where long periods of time working were supplemented by long work breaks, for example, 'seven on/seven off' sometimes affected schooling attendance:

So mum might live here but dad might work away at Moranbah or something, which is two and a half hours away. So the kids don't see their dad for two weeks, or a week, and then they go, "Well, when I come home, we will go away for a week," so then the kid misses a week of school.

She also suggested that issues arise because some of the young people in their community do not have a familiarity with large schools because of their family circumstances:

We have realised kids who are dropping out of school because their families rotate in/out of mining jobs or mum/dad have gone - you know, dad worked on a property and therefore they only ever did distance ed and then - because the mine money is too exciting - they all come into Emerald to do mining jobs. Therefore, these kids are really shocked going into a school with 600 students.

Fly-in/Fly-out workers in towns near mining centres have also contributed to steep rises in rent to the detriment of local residents competing for the same accommodation. Sharon cited the difficulties in the 'gemfields' outside of her town, especially in relation to accommodation. She told us about one of the young people who used her centre: 'I was worried about a kid yesterday because... there is not a lot of structured housing out there. Like, one of my boys, he's living in a tent in the back of someone's property'.

Such socio-economic factors shape the lives of students and their engagement with schooling. We suggest that they indicate the need for education to be seen as a community project and for mining companies to develop more 'education friendly' policies for the parents and carers of school aged children.

The failure to address youth disadvantage in regional areas of the state is often based upon a lack of understanding of the challenges faced by young people living in such areas. Linda, head of a youth program in a rural area noted:

I don't think people realise just how many young people are disengaged in our community; that live on the streets or don't live with their parents. They live with their friends, they are couch surfing. I honestly don't believe that people realise the difference there. I think there's a lot of judgment about why kids aren't at school and why they are walking the streets. People just look down their noses at these kids and disregard them, whereas when you know the story behind why they are like that, they are usually just a product of their environment.

Listening to the voices of those like Sharon and Linda who are working closely with young people in rural, regional and remote areas of Queensland will help to identify problems and thus find ways to address social, economic and educational disadvantage amongst young people living in those areas. The issue of poverty is a national one affecting urban and non-urban areas alike. However, there are increased challenges in rural areas pertaining to a lack of: employment options; access to services, including crisis services; and housing. Consequently, we suggest the need for community responses to these problems based upon inter-agency resources including a focus on increased access to education and training.

Race, ethnicity and culture

Issues of race, ethnicity and culture were ever present in all of our case study sites and youth worker interviews. However, in the rural and remote sites issues for young Indigenous people were stark. For example, Nancy, a Social Worker in a far west town, working with Youth Connections noted that in one particular location, that '100 percent of our clients are Indigenous'. This was echoed by Adrian a manager of a youth and community service in a major mining town: 'Most of our clientele, 99 percent of our clientele are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background'. Due to the high percentage of young Indigenous people in youth support services in rural and remote locations, Indigenous issues arose on a regular basis. Some of these reflect the complexity of the issues; for example, it was noted that due to incarceration, drug and alcohol use, health and transience issues, 'a lot of our young people are being raised by grandparents who try to do their best'. Adrian a manager of a youth and community service in a major mining town, who primarily worked with Indigenous young people was concerned about the young people who came to the town from very remote communities where there has been little 'white' education:

Most of these young people come from, like I said, very marginalised, disadvantaged backgrounds. So a whole history of families that have had very minimal exposure to formal

education and training. You talk to these aunts and uncles, mums and dads, grandmas even, and most of them haven't completed either primary or high school.

Some of the youth workers resorted to stereotypes about Indigenous people not valuing education, whilst recognising that education might also be seen as a form of 'assimilation'. Hence, comments like the following have been made:

I think there are some that they just don't value education for whatever reason it is. With some of the people that I speak with, they will say "it's a white man thing". They don't value the education that we value. The type of education that the white person might see as education, the Indigenous person may not see it as education. They just see it as "white fella's stuff". That also then trickles down to the young people as well.

Some of these stereotypic views of Indigenous people are challenged in the case study section that follows. However, we also point to the work of Indigenous scholars such as Martin Nakata, Chris Sarra and Marnee Shay who all indicate that education is highly valued by Indigenous people and is critical to the success of Indigenous people in Australia; additionally however, they argue that such educational experiences need not and should not come at the expense of culture.

Gender

We address the issue of gender in more detail in the next section of the report. Here we would just like to note that whilst, young men are more likely to become disenchanted with the education system than are girls, females are often likely to have fewer options outside of school. For example, Sharon, the Manager of the Neighborhood Youth Centre (cited above), also noted the impacts of gender in the mining town in which she was located:

The boys - well, there's always more hands-on type of industries here. If you wanted to be a mechanic, if you wanted to be a diesel fitter, if you wanted to be an electrician, if you wanted to work in that type of more, 'boy area', there're more opportunities for you than what there are for girls ... Girls really struggle because there're not so many industries for them, as in there would be in other bigger centres.

Furthermore, boys tend to have higher suspension and expulsion rates than girls. However, care is needed here as gender intersects in complex ways with race/ethnicity and poverty. Thus, expulsion rates of Indigenous girls can be higher than for middle class white boys (Lingard, Martino and Mills 2009). We would suggest that understanding complex issues of gender/gender identity/sexuality is necessary for addressing some of the issues facing young people in rural areas. In our previous study we met with a young man from a rural area who indicated that because of his gender identity he had felt 'outcasted' and had to come to a major city for his own safety. Whilst such issues can confront young people in urban areas, the lack of 'options' in terms of marginalised communities with which to identify in some rural and remote locations can make life very hard for some young people in these areas.



Conclusion

Marginalised young people in Queensland face varying combinations of personal, social, economic and cultural issues. However, those who live in rural, regional and remote areas of the state have added challenges. Our research has identified a lack of learning choices in these areas so that once suspended or excluded from public schooling, young people find there are few/no other options due to a lack of alternative educational services/ appropriate programs, financial pressures and often a hostile or infrequent transport system. Conversations with youth workers have also revealed reluctance on the part of some schools to work with their support programs so as to retain young people in education. They also cited a lack of follow-up from mainstream schools in respect of tracking young people exiting the system early.

Exacerbating the lack of learning choices, rural economies are often not supportive of appropriate types of work for unskilled young people, particularly girls. Periodic economic downturns due to, for example, drought put further pressure on the few opportunities that are available to young people living in regional Queensland. Changes in the mining sector have led to a lack of investment in local infrastructure due to the use of fly-in/fly-out workers which in turn has served to inflate local rents adding to the already desperate situation of homeless young people. According to our interviewees, this mining model has also disrupted family life for regional families, creating the potential for issues traditionally associated with schooling disengagement.

Finally, for young people who fall into any social, cultural or ethnic minority, life in a rural, regional or remote area of Queensland may be challenging. Those young people who challenge mainstream models of gender and sexuality potentially confront ostracism and bullying while Indigenous youth contend with a myriad of, already well-documented, issues connected to race and cross-cultural understanding.

The next section presents a series of vignettes with the intention of exploring some of the differences experienced by young people living in diverse areas of Queensland. Whilst there are clearly similarities in terms of ethos and intent, these three case studies demonstrate how different geolocations serve to shape problems of youth marginalization in particular ways and thus point to the need for local solutions as part of any responses to schooling disengagement.



Section 5: Case Studies

Part A. Contrasting geolocations: Inner city, tourist coast and very remote: Victoria Meadows, Seabreeze and Mulhi Flexible Learning Centres (FLCs):

Introduction

Situated in three very different geographical contexts, these three alternative schools were part of an education network operating flexible learning centres nationally, twelve of which were situated in Queensland. At the time of this research, it was stated that all their flexible learning centres focused on:

- individual needs of young people
- small group learning
- teacher and youth worker support
- learning experiences supporting social and emotional needs of young people as well as academic skills
- empowering young people to take personal responsibility for their actions and learning

Complementing this educational framework were the 'Four Principles': Respect, Participation, Safe & Legal and Honesty. According to their website, these principles were used by young people and staff at all sites to: encourage learning, build personal relationships, and resolve conflict.

However, in our interviews with staff at these centres, it was noted that despite the structural similarities, each flexible learning centre in the network had unique characteristics and ways of operating because the needs of its clientele were shaped by their specific geolocations. According to Damian, associate head of campus at Victoria Meadows, situated in inner-city Brisbane:

In the network, there are a lot of differences in the approach and everyone's got the same principles but how it's applied is different depending on the cohort. [For example, a rural FLC] used to run a bus to go round and pick up all the young people. They are not at the moment but we could never do that because our young people are so geographically located all through the city [and surrounds].

It was Damian's view that being in the inner city, Victoria Meadows attracted a more 'edgy' clientele interested in using the arts, particularly music, to explore their issues creatively: 'I think Victoria Meadows has probably got a little bit more of an edge about it because we are in the city'.

Tourist areas like the coastal strip where Seabreeze was located may bring layers of difficulties for disadvantaged young people who exist on the fringes of affluent communities and may be viewed with suspicion as described here by teacher, Sandy:

Everyone thinks Seabreeze is a really affluent area. We have got students here who are homeless; we have got students here who need food vouchers, bus vouchers to get to school; who need mental health help and counselling ... I taught for 18 years and I thought I had been and seen everything, until I came to this school four years ago ... About nearly Easter time, I took a group of six students for a coffee ... I had six kids with me that had never been taken to a coffee shop before; no aunty or adult in their life had ever taken them out for a coffee. When we got to the coffee shop, they had no idea how to order.

And this is in the middle of Seabreeze. On top of that, when we sat down and had a coffee, they felt that everyone else was looking at them; that they weren't worthy and good enough to sit at a coffee shop. And that hit me in the face. And it was a real - that actual experience of being with them, having them feel so inferior to everybody else in a public place, really hit home to me where a lot of students are coming from.

I guess my understanding and my empathy with their situation has grown from that. But it wasn't until I actually experienced it and felt their shame and also walking in - taking another group, I walked into a newsagent with them. We were going to go and pick out a range of magazines that they would like to have, so that we could have them on the tables. The way that they all watched, that they were looked at the whole time - they were followed around the store, was like "you are a criminal and I'm going to watch you".

Greg, who was principal of a cluster of flexible learning centres, including very remote FLC, Mulhi, described the challenges of being in a remote area of Queensland and responding to the particular contexts of young Indigenous people in areas such as language and diverse cultural needs:

Well, for the kids here [English is] their third, fourth/fifth language, so there's issues in doing schooling in English, for a start. [The school population is] transient in nature. There're a lot of kids coming in from the dry communities in the Territory or families, that have re-located here; and there are many families that constantly move around ... We get a lot of kids from Doomadgee, a lot of kids from all the communities around us; a lot of kids cross the border into the Territory. It's a real mix of clan groups or nation groups. There're even some problems in integrating some very traditional Indigenous kids with traditional upbringing, lore, culture/understanding and then some urban Indigenous kids.

In addition to their widely differing geographical locations, Victoria Meadows, Seabreeze and Mulhi Flexible Learning Centres had quite different origins.

Victoria Meadows FLC was founded in 1990 by a major City Council at the Victoria Meadows Amphitheatre for homeless young people. Its name at that time was the 'Victoria Meadows Flexi School' and in 2000 it moved to a building in an inner city suburb. In 2004 it once more relocated; this time to its current location in shared premises with a behavioural management unit. In 2006 it became a registered school. Although the school had plans to expand their intake to include junior secondary in 2015, at the time of our research Victoria Meadows Flexible Learning Centre catered to young people in the post-compulsory years of education. Many of these young people had to contend with homelessness, early parenthood, mental illness and various forms of addictions. Being in the post-compulsory age group also meant that attendance was traditionally entirely voluntary and their re-engagement with education as flexible as their lives allowed. According to the head of campus, Rowan:

Victoria Meadows has always been a senior school and we take that older cohort. So we are effectively dealing with older adolescents and young adults ... What that means is that we have focused on young people taking responsibility for not only their own learning but also for the structure of their day, within certain parameters ... Victoria Meadows was based on, and to a large extent continues to be young people making the decision to re-engage and ... there are many reasons why young people will say that we want to re-engage in education, not necessarily all about education, but that's a very different argument and it's a different conversation you are able to have with those young people about why they are here and what they are trying to get.

Because of this particular schooling context, one staff member wondered about the implications of the new junior cohorts:

One of the major challenges, I believe, by going into junior, I don't think that model is going to be very useful for, say, 12 to 15-year-olds who rightly understandably are going to require some more structure. The major problem that I see is having those two groups on the same campus who effectively require quite different models of education, of how the structure of the school is. That I see as being the major problem.

Across the school, they were considering these challenges, as the head of campus noted:

Rowan: My aim is to try and resolve that problem by having the junior school as a movable entity. So we will use the resources of the school, for example, go to the music studio on whatever, Tuesday afternoon; but on Monday, we are over at the PCYC. We [may do] a fishing trip on Thursday and in that way provide structure but touch base with the campus while not necessarily having the entire day on the campus.

When asked about the reasons for including younger students in a model that worked so well for the older cohorts Rowan pointed to the growing need for alternative schooling places for younger people (see Section 3). This view, we discovered, was endorsed by other teaching and youth professionals in other locations – the problems associated with youth marginalisation and disengagement were increasingly affecting not only junior secondary students but primary school age children as well. While wanting to respond, this posed challenges for Victoria Meadows:

Rowan: There's a demand in clients in the north-west corridor which the network simply doesn't have the capacity to build another school. We have a school that is functioning, so the drive is for us to take those junior [students] which the other high schools in the area are unable to deal with. As I say, I think that creates a difficulty for us too - and it would also be a financial difficulty with that because physically there's a limit to how many more young people that we can take. We require a high staff to student ratio in order to function and that's going to be difficult.

It appears that the growing numbers of FLCs across the State and elsewhere is part of an increasing need for and greater reliance on alternative education. Seabreeze FLC, situated on an affluent coastal strip, was one such school; it joined the network in 2006 after its beginnings as an educational program offered through a youth organisation. It catered to the seemingly 'hidden' problem of homeless, disadvantaged and disenfranchised young people (years 9-12) right in the middle of a tourist region that attracted many of the rich and famous from interstate and abroad. Timothy, who worked for the youth organisation noted:

There are a lot of lower socio-economic and a lot of rural areas on the coast as well; a lot of single parent families. Transport/finances are probably the biggest barriers, actually. And those two barriers are a barrier to education as well. You have probably got the two divides. You have got the affluent people [on the coast] and then you have got the people that are really struggling.

For young people in very remote areas of the state, the problems associated with economic disadvantage and social marginalisation are magnified by a lack of service options (see Section 4). Disengagement, suspension or exclusion from the only high school in town leaves young people with nowhere to go but the streets. To respond to such needs, Mulhi FLC was established in 2010 in a remote mining area of Queensland. With 94 percent Indigenous clientele, including young people in junior secondary, the school had a particular focus on culture as a way of responding to

the overall needs of its students. According to head of campus, Lynette, one of the traditional owners of the land around Mulhi: 'Look, I think cultural competency or cultural embedding of Indigenous perspective certainly needs to be maintained. Strong links to communities, but also maintaining Indigenous staff is a fairly high priority ...' Because many of the students are quite young and often living in unstable conditions that include substance abuse and a lack of monitoring, the school provided a bus to pick them up from home in the morning; along with a 'bridge' program to slowly transition young people into the actual campus.

Clearly, geolocation and history are big factors that differentiate the characteristics of these three centres. We suggest that we should not be seeking a single 'model' of educational reform; rather, we need to be identifying common practices that work to reconnect young people to education and then adapt them to the specific needs of diverse local contexts. Thus we now turn to our case study sites in order to exemplify the ways in which, at the time of our research visits, they each attempted to provide alternative ways of 'doing school' according to their specific contexts via the provision of: material supports to students; a positive school climate; and the use of pedagogy and a curriculum that catered to the particular populations of young people in their areas.

Victoria Meadows Flexible Learning Centre

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

At the time of this research, Victoria Meadows was operating as a senior campus and this shaped the flexible processes around attendance. Any assessment of how these processes may have changed because of intakes of younger students is outside the scope of the data we have gathered up to 2014. For purposes of this report, Victoria Meadows operated as a senior schooling site.

Our research involvement in Victoria Meadows Flexible Learning Centre started in 2009 and, during that project and this, we have spoken to a wide range of students, teachers, workers and several campus coordinators, we draw on all these data. Evidence from our research at this site supports the perspective that broader socio-economic factors are major contributors to young people's disengagement from mainstream schooling. For instance, we came across many students who were, or who had been, highly transient, and/or homeless.

During the period of our research this school described itself as a 'learning community' with the following characteristics: non-uniform; first name basis for all staff and students; teachers, youth workers and other support staff were usually known simply as 'workers' whose work crossed boundaries of teaching and counselling regardless of their formal titles. Young people who attended Victoria Meadows came from a range of ethnic backgrounds, although white Australian students were in the majority, and many were living independently. Students commonly put in a great deal of effort just to get to school. Some juggled work and/or caring responsibilities while others travelled significant distances to maintain their connection to learning. During an interview with one young student it emerged that her daily trip to the flexible learning centre took 90 minutes (when the buses were on time). On the way to school she passed several other mainstream schools, the closest of which was just a five minute walk from her home. The centre also catered to young parents, primarily young mothers via the provision of a crèche.

The daily morning and afternoon meetings provided forums for the voices of all people – young and old – at the school. At the time of one of our visits, for example, they began the day with a range of organisational notices but also a fascinating discussion about the ‘nature of happiness’ led by one of the teacher/youth workers. Many of the young people at Victoria Meadows had been suspended or excluded for a variety of reasons from mainstream schools. They looked back at their times in those schools with anger, resentment and/or sadness. Yet, in their current school, they spoke of the respect they had for the workers and for the school and what it was trying to do for them. Much of this respect came from the ways in which they were given opportunities to make contributions to the community and to the ways in which they were listened to by the workers. Clearly the practice of treating the students as young adults provided recognition of the many adult problems they faced in their daily lives. Here it must be noted that ‘flexible’ arrangements for attendance and completion of tasks for learning underpinned the ways in which Victoria Meadows accommodated the many challenges inherent in the lives of its students. Their focus on retaining students involved allowing them the time they needed; it meant allowing the students to have periodic sessions of non-attendance while they sorted out their lives.

Material support for students

Samantha (student): Yeah it's not just like, they don't just help you with what's going at school and you go home at the end of the day and then that's it; you can talk to them about what's going on outside school and you can get help with all of that different stuff...

Victoria Meadows Flexible Learning Centre attempted to ameliorate the lack of resources and poverty that faced many of its students. For instance, they provided a crèche so that young parents, primarily young women, were able to access childcare while studying. According to one young mother:

Because I can still have my education, my son can come and it's, like, I don't know, it's so much different to a school like you have a really good relationship and bond with the teachers and other students.

Among other practical supports, food was provided throughout the day, along with showers, access to social workers and legal services. Meeting the material needs of these young people was critical for ensuring that they could stay at school. However, this alone does not completely explain many of the young people's on-going commitment to their education. There were other elements identified by the students: these included the environment, teaching strategies, relationships and curricula that were connected and relevant to the interests and goals of students.

School climate: environmental and relational factors

Sally (student): I love it here. It's like, they're so much more respectful and they do really leave it up to you to act like an adult and be your own person which was how I was brought up. I was brought up as like a little adult so, yeah.

The way people treat each other impacts upon the emotional climate of places and this was frequently noted by our interviewees. Like the other schools in the network, Victoria Meadows Flexible Learning Centre had replaced traditional school rules with the *Four Rs* – ‘rights, respect, relationships and responsibilities’. These applied to staff and students alike. One of the teachers, affirmed the need for having ‘a place where difference is accepted, where alternative viewpoints are accepted; alternative lifestyles are accepted in a safe and respectful environment where your ability to succeed in academic endeavours isn't the be all and end all of you as a person’. Another teacher

stressed the importance of community in contrast to some structures he had experienced in mainstream schools:

I think in mainstream school it is the role of the teacher to drive that [educational] agenda and to drag, pull or push young people along with it. One of the advantages that Victoria Meadows has is that it started with community and has introduced education rather than being education and introducing community development.

Teacher/youth worker Gary noted the relationship-focus of the school: 'I always think, to me, schooling and stuff is about relationships - we work within principles, not rules'. The positive relationships and community ethos was also noted by a female student who had come to Victoria Meadows after suffering severe bullying at her previous school:

You can sit down and talk to any teacher here. They are called workers rather than teachers and they are all addressed by their first names. They respect us, as people, rather than, 'Oh, you are younger, so you don't know anything' ... [Our] community is a really big thing.

The use of first names as an important aspect of the emotional climate of the school was noted by many students. It also worked to distance many of the students from their earlier negative experiences of schooling. One of the students explained: 'You know it's not Sir, Madam, it's not Mr. and Mrs. whatever. I couldn't even tell you what half the teachers' last names were... Yeah pretty much, they're all you know, like, - George, or Angela and, you know, you don't really know their last names. It makes you feel equal not below, like it's not 'yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir'. What was interesting here is that this student who had had a very difficult time at his previous school was fully engaged in learning and that the practices that 'make you feel equal not below' were seen as central to supporting this engagement.

Given the stressful issues many of the young people confronted, sometimes emotions surfaced at school and students might be asked to go home as a 'circuit breaker'; however, they were always welcomed back. Behaviour was dealt with in a relational context of 'Rights, Respect, Responsibility and Relationships'. Both workers and students at the school emphasized to us that their relationships were based on trust and that when students were asked to take some time out they did return to the school and the issue was addressed as a community.

In our view, the environment cultivated at Victoria Meadows was a socially supportive and educative one allowing young people to develop interpersonal skills that will facilitate their relationships elsewhere. As noted here by Damian:

Just the young people engaging at lunch, just to be able to sit down and have lunch with other young people and adults; to be able to pick up their plate and put it away and not be engaging in any socially aggressive behaviour and just to be able to interact. They are able to develop these life skills and be able to be members of the community and be able to then get work/jobs, because they are now able to socialise and interact.

Pedagogy and curriculum

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

The young people who attended Victoria Meadows FLC worked at their own pace along individualised curricular pathways that might lead to the Queensland Certificate of Education or a

variety of TAFE Certificates or tertiary preparation. They appreciated the variety of curricula and activities supporting personal development plus the individualised instruction and pathways as noted by this student, Colin:

The teachers are willing to help you out and have one-on-one sessions if required and they treat you like an actual person, no matter what your back story. We have also got all the facilities for those that want to do art, cooking, music, whatever. We have got everything.

He continued enthusiastically about the teaching:

The teacher sits down with you and helps you out, when it is required; and they will actually discuss things with you. So it comes across as a more easy manner to understand. And if you want, they can even do little one-on-one sessions with you, for your assignments ...

Jennifer, who had to leave her previous school because she fell pregnant, noted the flexible opportunities provided by Victoria Meadows: 'I heard about them through a young parents' program that I went to so I've just come to complete Grade Twelve ... maths and English and then gradually put other subjects into it'.

And similarly for Keith: 'Like its flexible you'll have assignments but they can hand them in – like people might have things going on at home and in a normal school they wouldn't take that into consideration whereas here they'll take that into consideration, like personal things. There's like reasons you can't do your assignments. You don't have to come; you don't get detention or anything like that if you don't come'.

'Flexibility' extended to all areas of managing their school and personal lives. Amy, for instance, who had at one time been confined to a psychiatric ward, explained that: 'They don't judge you by what is happening in your home life. They'll support you all the way but they won't tell you, 'Absolutely not, you can't come here anymore', they say, 'if you you're having a hard time you can just come in'.

Damian, in describing the curricular offerings, noted a particularly successful outcome:

We had a young mum come and visit last week, who is doing university- she's studying nursing. We have young people here doing TAFE/certificates as part of their course here that they come here and then we have a transition program into university.

Here it must be noted that students at Victoria Meadows had learning plans that responded to individual needs and students choose a variety of options leading to employment, apprenticeships, other training options as well as university.

At Victoria Meadows, in addition to standard curricula, students also have the opportunity to obtain barista and (as many of them in the current cohort are over 18) responsible service of alcohol certificates to support part time employment opportunities.

Finally ...

Bridgette (teacher): It's based on unconditional love or positive regard and I guess second chances

In summary, material support coupled with respectful relationships shaped the pedagogy and flexibly delivered curriculum at Victoria Meadows FLC. Many of their students faced very challenging adult life issues as noted earlier. However, what was very apparent in their comments was that the vast majority of these students would not have been in any form of education if it were not for the opportunities provided by Victoria Meadows. This school provided a way for diverse groups of young

people in the post compulsory phase of learning to reconnect educationally within a supportive environment that included the need for: childcare; accommodation; travel; and basic necessities such as food and access to showers. Flexible attendance arrangements were also crucial to these young people as they worked to balance the competing demands of independent living in a major capital city whilst trying to reconnect with education in the post-compulsory years. In contrast, the next case study, Seabreeze FLC takes us to a coastal region of Queensland and demonstrates that even in the most idyllic settings some young people may be highly marginalised.

Seabreeze Flexible Learning Centre

Sandy (teacher): Teachers have to understand that they could have someone in their room that has been homeless for three days. They could have someone in their room whose parent will not go and buy a calculator and yet, the kids will get in trouble for not having one at school. It is not their fault, you know.

Breathtaking beach scapes, 5 Star resorts, restaurants and romantic getaways feature heavily in the promotional material for Seabreeze District. However, like other regional areas that rely heavily on tourism, there are hidden challenges for the local residents. While tourism is an important economic driver it can be very unpredictable and highly competitive for stakeholders. An over-reliance on tourism opens the door to economic changeability as well as limiting career paths for young people (and other residents) through a focus on associated modes of employment (i.e. retail, accommodation, café, restaurants, etc.). At the time of our research, Seabreeze had lower household and personal income levels than SEQ and QLD. This was in part due to the high numbers of retirees and absent investor-landlords but also stemmed from the fact that many local residents were employed in lower wage industries such as retail, accommodation and hospitality.

Despite the regional demographics, Seabreeze is portrayed as a playground for the rich and famous as well as families looking for the perfect summer holiday. Scratch the idyllic surface, however, and one finds an underbelly of poverty and marginalisation silently shaping the lives of a significant number of the local young people. High rents and a lack of regular and cost-effective public transport exacerbate the problems faced by young people who are forced to leave home and/or school and seek alternative life and educational or employment options. Within this context of socio-economic alienation, Seabreeze FLC provides a space for rebuilding. The head of campus, Narelle, subscribed to spiritual understandings that underpinned her approach to establishing 'common ground' (equal respect) with the students:

I think most organisations...any organisation there is hierarchy and 'common ground' doesn't come into hierarchy...got to let go of the need to be in charge all the time. I completely...don't have any desire to have any power...and I like to bring out leadership in anybody that is in the school, staff to young people and that happens...everyone has an opportunity to shine as a leader.

Narelle routinely sat on the school veranda so that she was a constant presence available for young people as they went about their learning. Her commitment to a more inclusive, nurturing style of school leadership was manifest in her approach to student welfare and efforts at professional development to provide the kind of support needed for their well-being:

You might spend a bit more time building a relationship because a lot of young people aren't going to trust it because they have may have come from a mainstream system and they think 'it's all bullshit'. But then they actually see that you really are genuine ... I am going to India at the end of the year to do my yoga teacher training. When I come back in the mornings, we can do yoga.

Other teachers such as Sandy had also found their professional 'home' at Seabreeze. She explained why she did not go back to teaching in a mainstream school:

It wasn't a hard decision, really. I think it was the way that we work with the students here. You really felt that is where I needed to be. We build relationships with these students here, we know so much more of their background; they feel so much safer in telling you. If you understand and know where they are coming from, you can work with that.

Schools like Seabreeze may provide teachers with alternative and more fulfilling opportunities for their vocation as noted by Sandy:

So I do believe that personality has a lot to do with teachers as well and teachers sort of suited to working with these students; because you have got to be able to keep your cool. There's no point you getting upset about anything; you have got to be flexible. You have to be able to wing it, fly by the seat of your pants some days, and that is the way it goes.

Such regard for the circumstances and needs of these young people were also made evident in the practical supports the school provided to those in need. Given the younger clientele than Victoria Meadows, most of the students still lived with either parents or other family members but their lives could still be lacking in basic necessities. Those who were homeless were not necessarily on the streets but, rather, couch surfing and constantly seeking shelter. Clearly such contexts have negative consequences for stable reengagement with schools. Seabreeze FLC worked to provide on-site practical supports, by for example, providing lunch every day which the students helped to prepare.

Material support for students

Bob (student): They look at the kid's lifestyle; they look at where that student wants to be and how they are struggling and they actually take it into account.

Like similarly structured alternative schools, Seabreeze FLC addressed the primary needs of shelter, food and livelihood before moving on to other areas of a young person's life. Food was available during the day and on 'Friday there is a special cook-up of bacon and eggs' which was seen as a highlight for many young people. The kitchen served multiple purposes such as teaching life skills and community responsibility as Denise went on to outline:

[Last Friday] students didn't get their usual bacon and eggs due to a student hacking a teacher's phone and not owning up. *All* students then lost this privilege, so as to encourage community responsibility ... If a student does cross the whole community, they have to stand in front of the whole community and apologise. So it's not just to the one individual; that's what we are teaching them - community values.

Additional help was provided in other areas as needed:

Denise: We advocate for them, go through housing, get their paperwork up; we get Centrelink to come in here once a week, without our students having to go there, because it is a daunting image; and also because Centrelink is a big organisation, it doesn't have the capacity. So we usually have a set person that comes here ... I will find out what they want. I will contact Centrelink saying, 'This person has got this need.' Then the Centrelink lady will see them first and then she may refer them on to a youth worker if they are homeless because they need all that paperwork to actually get into the agencies.

In these alternative sites, the various elements of schooling environments overlapped. Thus, such practical concerns as outlined above provided the context for shaping trusting relationships with the students.

School climate: environmental and relational factors

Colin (youth worker): My role is more or less to provide the kids with opportunities to develop a sense of feeling good about themselves.

As with other flexi schools, small numbers of students at Seabreeze allowed for greater levels of pastoral care. Small group mentoring and teaching contexts shaped the strong relationships between staff and students at the school. According to arts, special needs and maths teacher, Sandy, 'relationships make a huge difference. Them having respect and knowing that you really care about them is huge'. Such care was made public on the noticeboard near the door of the school office which featured celebratory comments about students' personal journeys and progress. Strategies like 'student of the week' were motivating for the young people:

Denise (admin): For them to sort of go, 'Oh, wow, you know, at mainstream I was nothing, but a troublemaker, to suddenly Student of the Week'! It is building up their self-esteem. That's what we always do; we don't speak down to our students.

Denise went on to describe the centrality of the '4 Principles' that underpinned the schools in their network: "Honesty, respect, participation and safe and legal". They are our four principles that we are always working with. Rules-based frameworks don't work with disengaged people because they have had so much authority telling them what to do and how to do it; whereas this participation thing works for them'. The head of campus, Narelle, as indicated earlier was influenced by the notion of building 'common ground' between students and staff. This democratic, mutually respectful context appeared to be fundamental to shaping the inclusive, participatory community that we found at Seabreeze. According to Narelle:

And the very cool thing is, too, as part of this common ground, we never have *staff* solving problems. We have the *community* solving problems. For example, we had a real issue that was going on for quite some time, which was about attendance on Fridays because normally Friday is a half day. But we were getting few young people attending at all on Friday. So then we put it to the young people. Earlier in the year, I said, "We really have to do something about this because we are a five day program. We do need to be here, want you here", and they said, "Well, how about we make the day longer?" *Longer??* This from young people who had left school! It was because we have got young people who travel so far and pay for the bus. They wanted it to be worthwhile.

Such processes facilitated experiences in democracy, Narelle explained:

We took a vote because we try, also, to allow our young people to experience a democratic practice as well. Hopefully that will encourage them to - when they leave – to vote and. So we did a vote on it and the majority of said they wanted it longer. So we changed it.

Timothy who worked for a community youth organisation that supported the school, described the role played by the school as a substitute family:

It becomes an environment where they feel safe; an environment where they feel accepted as well, and they feel quite comfortable in that. They can come to school; regardless of what's going on, they have got somebody that they can talk to. Even in (rural town), we have got students who would catch two busses just to come to school ... they needed somebody to debrief. So the school becomes like a family.

In reviewing the groundwork of material and emotional supports provided by Seabreeze, it became clear that these approaches were vital to the curricular and pedagogical aims of the school. Bianca, a former student talked about the way this worked when she was there:

Respect here is where we are all on the same level. No-one is higher than each other. The teachers and the students are at the same level and if you feel that you are not happy with what they are doing, you just approach them and they will give you respect to say, "Hey, I don't understand what you have been doing".

Equally important was the fact that students had access to curricular pathways that attempted to meet them where they were at educationally and help them to map the next stage of their journey.

Pedagogy and curriculum

Evie (student): We are, like, being supported and they are not really - like, they don't just hand you the work. They talk about it and, like, explain everything; do a lot of presentations for it, which is good.

Effective pedagogies flow from positive teacher/student relationships and these were fundamental to the learning happening at Seabreeze FLC and noted here by teacher, Sandy:

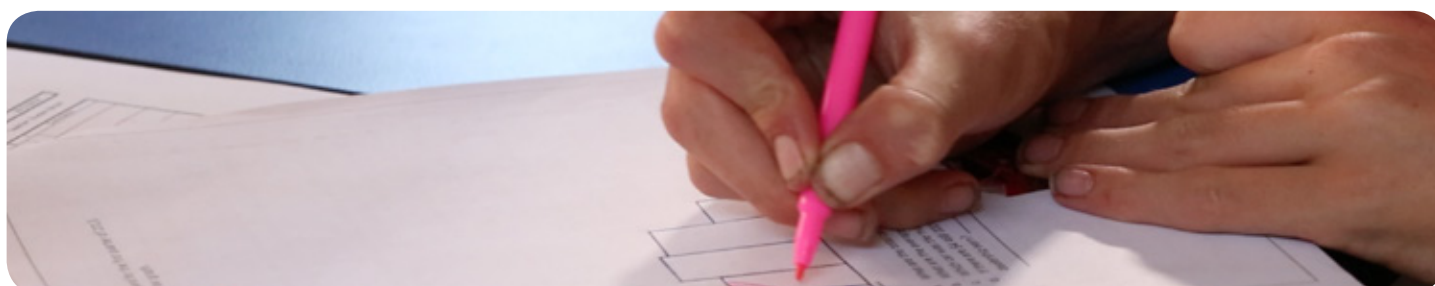
So I do believe that personality has a lot to do with teachers as well and teachers sort of suited to working with these students; because you have got to be able to keep your cool. There's no point you getting upset about anything; you have got to be flexible. You have to be able to wing it, fly by the seat of your pants some days, and that is the way it goes. You have to be able to do it, to be able to engage them.

Such observations also underline the need for teaching personnel to be experienced, flexible and emotionally strong when working with young people, particularly those in junior secondary, whose schooling experiences have largely been negative.

The school drew upon the Australian Curriculum, Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) syllabuses as well as vocational offerings and short courses in literacy and numeracy. The head of campus interviewed prospective students and then, with teachers and workers, a personalised learning plan would be developed for each student closely aligned with their needs. According to one of the students, Bob:

They look at the kid's lifestyle; they look at where that student wants to be and how they are struggling and they actually take it into account. It is the only place where I have learnt that; it is this place that does that.

For many young people, the challenge of managing their learning can be overwhelming if they have had significant absences from schooling institutions. At Seabreeze, teachers adapted materials to assist students in working at their own pace as described here by former student, Bianca:



Rather than hand you the textbook, they would photocopy sections and give you a bit at a time. So you would work at your own pace. You wouldn't have to all sit in the class and go, "We are working on this page today." It was, "Work on whatever section you feel comfortable with and then we will go from there."

A responsive, student-centred pedagogy is key to engaging young people and providing them with experiences of successful learning. One of the core math teachers, Sandy described her approach:

We start where they are at. Yes, very much so. I have even had different topics happening, like Foundational Maths happening, with, say, two/three [students]; and then the rest of the group may be doing percentages. If I try and start off with something that's too airy-fairy or - it just goes over their head. I've lost them and you can just forget it.

The other thing that's worked is try to work around a theme. We tried to do that across the whole school. That didn't really work. But I have done a thing about bones and investigation with bones and measuring and length of bones and the old crime scene investigation topic. That got a lot of them in, with doing a graph with a lot of logical thinking with deduction, to work out the "who done it" type mystery. They were doing algebra in amongst that. But they didn't realise that they were doing it. So you can be sneaky!

Real-world tasks and establishing connections with hands-on engagement also featured highly at Seabreeze FLC. Again, Sandy:

But if I have got Colin [youth worker who is also a qualified carpenter and personal trainer]- online at the same time as me he will take them and do a woodworking project. As far as I am concerned, they are doing measurement, angles; they are working with the wood to talk about wastage and how much it costs for them to buy - they go to Bunnings to buy the wood. It is the whole process of making it. They are getting a lot of Maths in, which is a real-life skill in that Maths, instead of me having them in the room, and being frustrated and just about banging their head on the desk. So for a minority that is vital, I feel. When they go and do their gym, too, they are talking about reps, they are talking about heart rates; they are talking about time, also.

Finally ...

Gill (social worker): *Non-violent, peaceful, power living is what they learn here...*

For the first time, many of the young people attending Seabreeze FLC were encouraged to find their voice and from this experience, confidence and self-esteem developed. As indicated by Gill:

We encourage young people to run those meetings [daily, whole school] and staff will probably get better at that. But when the young people run it, it's awesome to watch. One young person who didn't speak at [her previous school] has run the whole school meeting. She stands up and speaks. She also came to an event where we represented all the flexi schools. And that is the thing for me, to see that young people finally feel safe to speak up and to have a go.

And -

A lot of our students are high IQ. It is just because of their stuff [that they are in their circumstances]. And they get in here and they flourish. And then we get them into traineeships or whatever, and they stand out. People talk about our students because they have got that. In mainstream, say a television station came and wanted to speak to young people, in mainstream, it is the school captains that do that. These guys would never get an opportunity. Here they get those opportunities and they start to become who they are

going to be. ***So I love to have them for three years, because in three years, the person who leaves here is awesome.***

The 14-18 year old students at Seabreeze FLC had to contend with daily reminders of their social alienation from the affluent tourist populations that came and went with the changing seasons; their sense of estrangement from place appeared to be much more acute than for the dispersed, urban, somewhat older clientele (16-25 years) of Victoria Meadows. As noted earlier, residents looked on them with suspicion and because of their regional location along the coast it was difficult for them to find connections elsewhere where they could 'blend in'. Even local transport was difficult as they had to rely on infrequent bus services – if they had the money to buy a ticket. In Queensland such challenges increase with geolocation and this was clearly evident for the young people who attended the next case study for site, Mulhi FLC.

Mulhi Flexible Learning Centre

Ken (youth support): Yeah, this is where I want - I want to work with our youth, because they are our future

Situated in the far north-west of Queensland, like all schools in remote areas, Mulhi Flexible Learning Centre faced challenges in respect of its geolocation. Additionally, most of its students came from a variety of Indigenous communities meaning there was a mix of languages and family groupings. According to the Principal, Greg:

We get a lot of kids from Doomadgee, a lot of kids from all the communities around us; a lot of kids cross the border into the Territory. So it's a real mix of clan groups or nation groups, they call them in the Territory. There're even some problems in integrating some very traditional Indigenous kids with traditional upbringing, lore, culture/understanding and then some urban Indigenous kids. And then we have got a small number - we have had a couple of European kids. We have got a small group (3/6) of Polynesian kids at any time as well.

However, this also meant that the school had access to the knowledges of local Elders who provided wonderful support for the young people:

Greg: We have a lot of Elders come into the school for a whole range of things. We have run a Men's/Women's Group with Elders. The Elders come in - we have had some come in to do ballroom dancing, so very western, but others have taken them out on the country and talk about bush tucker and lore and all that sort of that. Very traditional involvement of Elders but also just great support from the Elders' community here as well.

The remote mining town in which Mulhi was located used mostly Fly-in/Fly-out workers so investments in the local economy and associated jobs had decreased. Flow-on effects for residents included greater reliance on welfare and the many social problems connected to poverty. Coupled with this was the historical legacy of colonialism and racial dislocation and alienation for indigenous populations. Thus, the level of material support provided to the mostly indigenous (94%) young people at Mulhi, needed to be considerable.

Material support for students

Danielle (student): You can have breakfast, if you wanted. There's toast and stuff. Then you have your big lunch and then you have afternoon tea.

As is the case in other flexible learning centres in this network, Mulhi FLC provided a lot of wrap-around practical supports for its students. According to youth support worker, Will: 'We don't charge them anything. We pick them up in the mornings; they get a lift. We cook for them anything, really; lots of things'. Co-head of campus, Lynette also described other services they connected students to:

Every Wednesday, all the kids know that the Centrelink lady comes... We do have some other support structure around that, but mental health, we are still flirting with the idea. We know there's lots of money around it but unfortunately schools like this need that extra support around mental health. It is a must. If you have a look at our kids with the foetal alcohol syndrome, they grow out of the features but in terms of *otitis media* (middle ear infection), the hearing problem is still - it gets worse.

Lucy, a teacher, also told us: 'If they need to go to court or youth justice - like, today, a lot of them will be going, because it's Wednesday, Children's Court. They will get transported there. So that's what our support youth workers do'.

Mulhi FLC also had a program to support young people to establish learning and personal routines once they have decided to come to the school. Another teacher, Lorna, described how it operated:

If people have been out of school for a little while, it's just reminding them, 'Remember, we have routine', that sort of stuff. It is making sure they understand the [Four] Principles and they have to have a personal learning plan before they can transition from the induction program. So it's asking them, 'What's your goal? Why should you be here? What do you want?' Try to get them to own it. Whereas, 'Bridge', you have got [completely disengaged [young people]], they don't want to go to school.

'Bridge' programs under the auspices of its Christian sponsors and partly funded by the Queensland government, operate alongside the flexible learning centres. As their name indicates, the aim is to 'build a bridge' between where young people are at (out of home, youth justice etc.) and relevant forms of education and training. The young people we met at Mulhi confronted a range of debilitating life issues such as discrimination, racism, dislocation, poverty and neglect resulting in anxiety, abuse, homelessness, substance abuse and involvement with the youth justice system; despite the comparatively small numbers of students, some were not comfortable coming to the school campus and therefore the youth workers and transition teachers met them in parks or out bush – wherever they were willing to meet. Current neo-liberal practices in youth work have disrupted this traditional approach. In recent years the push by the funding bodies to report against "Outcomes" and "Competitive Tendering" processes have pushed youth workers to work with what could be described as a 'softer target group' or 'outcome friendly' groups of young people, marginalising further young people, such as those attending Mulhi Flexi School. However, this was being resisted by Lorna.

Lorna described her work in this area at Mulhi:

I am the Bridge teacher. What I do is, basically I go out there and any young people who have been completely disengaged from school for a period of time - young people who have a lot of problems building relationships with people, trusting people - they are the sort of people that I am going after. My role is to try and build relationships with them and build trust with them again, so that eventually, hopefully within that 12 months that I have got them, they will transition into flexi or even go somewhere else, in mainstream sort of thing. I guess you could say what I am doing is bridging the gap for them ... I might spend the first couple of weeks knocking on your door and it will be trying to get you out of bed. It can take me two hours to do pick-up in the morning. The real deal-breaker for them is breakfast, 'I am going to feed you breakfast and lunch'. They come in hungry - that's what brings them in.

[Q.] What are some of the other barriers to re-engagement or engagement for these kids?

A big thing was coming to school. The flexi has a big fence. To come into a fenced area, you are stuck in here and you have to prove to them, 'You know what, the gate is open. We are not locking you up'. It is also coming into the classroom. The ones that we have got, going out bush was perfect because you didn't have walls; you didn't have - it didn't have a board where I was going to be standing up. So breaking down - taking that fear away, 'You can go into a space like that and it's not going to be all, you know, you are going to do this and this and this'. It's an okay space to be in.

That was one of our biggest struggles coming to flexi; they took a while to actually want to come in the room. They would hide outside with the ball. That was their safety blanket, you know. And then taking the basketball away from them, taking their blanket away, you had to teach them another blanket.

[Q.] Do you do outreach, do you go out in the car?

Yeah. So I'm not based at the school. It is only at the moment because I am transitioning a couple across, that I am here, about to go into a new mob. But basically I spent all of Term 1 with my mob out bush. So we go 4-wheel driving every day and sit around, talking and so forth, have a yarn, and just try and build up a relationship. Some of them take a whole year to build a relationship. The ones that have been pretty good, we have been at it for about a year. So it's been a lot easy to transition them.

Once young people had physically re-engaged with the school, the staff worked hard to create a supportive and nurturing school environment so that the students could develop confidence and self-esteem and start planning pathways to further training or the workforce.

School climate: environmental and relational factors

Mikki (student): The teachers are fun and yeah, they're great and they laugh a lot!

The co-head of campus, Lynette, stated that it was vital for their community be safe and welcoming: 'Basically, my role is to provide a culturally safe environment for everyone; other staff members, but most importantly for our students or our young people and their families'. She regarded connection to country and family as helping to support their students:

Making sure that they are also connected to country and also to family, is a major overall for us; and to have that engagement of families and different skin groups. Skin groups: it is a matter of families that are connected in the same clan groups and it is about their cultural protocols of men and women's business and who is actually doing lore within that skin group.

There was a high Indigenous presence in the staffing of Mulhi FLC and as Lucy explained, this meant that there was a high level of empathy for the students and understanding of the challenges they faced in their daily lives:

[Q.] Being from a local community, does that help you with the kids here and working with them? You know some of their families?

I am actually related to some of them, some of their families. It does, like being Indigenous myself and being a local. A lot of them, I know what their homes are like. Like, a lot of these ones with domestic violence and substance abuse at home. I am one of five and I have witnessed - I know what it's like growing up in that environment and I was lucky not to have

my own adult life like that and I chose to go the other way. It does help working with these ones, trying to encourage them that they can have a better - even though their home life might be like that, they can create this life for themselves.

Youth support worker, Ken (who was of Aboriginal *and* Torres Strait Islander background) outlined his perspective on the links between self-belief, hope and the possibility of re-engagement in learning:

How about asking the kids what *they* want to be? Not, 'Yeah, I want to work in the council'. 'No, no, no, what's your *dream*?' Because they are not going to work for something if they don't know what it's for ... Every kid has a dream, you know? No matter where they come from, they have a dream about something. If they asked about that dream and we as mentors, or as teachers, devoted - like, we are in-school time hours and we use those hours to create that - actually *accomplishing* their *dreams* instead of passing tests and scores.

As with the young people at Victoria Meadows, recognition of the 'adult problems' students at Mulhi faced necessitated a parallel relational paradigm shift premised upon respect whilst teaching them social skills they could apply elsewhere:

That is the thing with the flexi, we have the principles, instead of having rules. So it's good because everything we do here, we are also able to show them that you can apply it outside of here; all the values and stuff, like respecting people. Whereas in the mainstream it's 'you have to do this/that', and it just doesn't work for them.

Effective teaching relies heavily on effective relationships and thus the supportive and positive school climate of Mulhi Flexi was fundamental to their educational goals.

Pedagogy and curriculum

Ellie (student): Someone come in and do cultural activities, like each day a different class. Currently, he's not doing as much, so each class has time out bush. We also have the induction program. They go out quite often. Like, they are doing some sort of horticulture project. I think they were going to make some sort of bush medicine...

The pedagogical approaches used at Mulhi Flexible Learning Centre were underpinned by relationships and the Christian network's principles of 'Respect, Honesty, Safe & Legal and Participation'. Teacher, Lorna outlined how this framework shaped her work:

I sit down with them. I don't stand up, like a teacher; we are on the same level, you know. Because that's a big part of that barrier, the authority-figure. For them, a lot of the authority figure, it's police. So you are trying to break down that, 'I'm not that person. I am a safe person. You can talk to me'.

For Lynette, having an Indigenous-informed framework for pedagogy was an important element of the school:

I guess as a leader of a school, predominantly of Indigenous young people - we do have non-Indigenous ... in terms of our pedagogy, we do it a little bit different to mainstream schools.

[Q.] Could you say a bit about that pedagogy?

Basically around the pedagogy that we have got at the moment, it's more culturally inclusive in terms of how we structure the curriculum. It is to young people, that English is not the

first language; it's actually their second. So, obviously, we need to be making sure that our methods of deliverables is going to be more effective for them as a learner. When I started schooling, English was my fifth language.

Recognition of the fact that English is not the first language of many Indigenous communities is fundamental to closing educational gaps and thus Lynette advocated for a very specific change to teacher training programs to accommodate this:

They need to be ESL trained, most definitely. To me, that just provides the foundation. If you look at all of our young people, where English is not their first language, that type of method would certainly be most beneficial for our young kids.

[Q.] And the curriculum then has a strong focus too?

Absolutely. Dealing with these types of kids - and I was one of them, as I was growing up, coming from a very poor family and then coming through schooling; it was one of those people [one of her teachers] that basically were out-of-the-box for me - that wanted me to achieve at a very high level - certainly pushed me and invested in me, obviously, my future. I think that's certainly paid off and we need to do the same thing. We don't want hand-outs at all. You give us hand-outs, we are still going to be in poverty for the next 20-odd years. Give us a little bit of stability, you know, and a bit of human rights, where we want the same quality education.

Additionally, Lynette regarded the curriculum as a vehicle for fostering inter-cultural understanding and reconciliation: 'It's about implementing/embedding Indigenous perspective for *all kids* in the school, not just specific for Indigenous, because that's certainly going to cut a few strings for us in terms of reconciliation'.

At Mulhi, teachers planned together to teach across a range of disciplines, VET and life skills programs as noted here by Lucy:

[Q.] Do you teach everything to that class?

Yes, at the school, you know, that's where we are very different to mainstream secondary school. Basically, we do, yeah, pretty much - oh, well, I would say English and Maths and as a routine we do that in the morning. In the middle section, we do VET. Like, we are doing VET right now, doing 'License for Life'. The other teachers are doing horticulture, independent living skills, and they are all points to their QCE as well. What we have been doing in the last two weeks - and it's working really well for Science and SOSE - we are combining as a whole school. That's actually working better than doing it in our own classes. The rest of the teachers and myself, we will get together and we will take turns at planning it or building the resources.

According to one of the teachers, Elizabeth, one of the curricular challenges was the need to address the gaps in learning that students arrived with:

A lot of it involves doing spelling and dictionary meanings and writing words and sentences. They really enjoy that sort of stuff. I find these kids, because there's so many gaps in their learning because they haven't attended primary school or the like, they enjoy primary school sort of tasks; you know, spelling activities, finding little words, writing word pyramids.

However, teachers also found ways to connect the curriculum to the lives and needs of the students:

Elizabeth: Then they need to write down examples of why it's important to read. So they have come up with heaps of stuff on their own, like, 'It's important to use Facebook; to go shopping'. So they have come up with lots of different categories for those things and they have written all those in their books. So there's a bit of discussion. One-on-one discussion because they are all at different levels. One of them has just started 'why do I want to start reading better?', and he's reading/writing notes about 'if you can't read, it can be dangerous because you might take the wrong dose of a medicine', or something. It's all life skill sort of stuff. It is trying not to make it boring.

The Principal, Greg, saw the curriculum as a means to foster the broader well-being of the students: 'So health and well-being, and principles [Four Rs] are a big focus on curriculum. It is quite intentional. It's not what I would call a hidden curriculum; it's in our planning and everything that we do. Then there is [also] a big focus on literacy/numeracy'.

One of the elements of alternative educational sites that facilitate their success is the small size of classes. However, at Mulhi the intensity of the pedagogical and relational work was such that 'small' took on a very contextual meaning. Co-head of campus Patrick recounted:

I was in a class this morning, there might have been five/six young people but the teacher on her own couldn't do that and even, myself, I could only work with a couple of young people at the time. There were some that were missing out, but that is how intense this [is]- well, a small group is really important, one-to-one. Yeah, it's really important for the success of this place.

Finally ...

Max (teacher): Success? Yeah, it's very hard to look at through our eyes, you know. And then 'what measure/value' - you know, my success is having a student come to school and staying alive, have something to eat, knowing where he is. That is a huge success.

At the time of our visit we spoke to two groups of young people (one of boys and the other, girls) who were very eager to shyly assure us of the difference the school had made in their lives. They spoke so quietly that part of the recordings could not be transcribed but from our notes and recollections we were left with an impression of their personal connection to the school and their optimism for their futures. We asked the boys:

[Q.]How do you think the staff make you think differently about things?

Giving us opportunities. Like, they don't tell us to do it. They *ask* us if we want to do it, or not. If we don't, they will give us something that we want to do. We are not forced to do anything. Like, not even forced to come to school. If we have had bad days, you tell them and they will help you...it's really good ... It's a community.

[Q.} Nice eating together and things like that?

Yeah, yeah, talking to each other, communicating with each other. Just laugh about tiny things.

Celina, one of the student support teachers, argued that that one of the 4 Principles, Respect, fitted well with connection to culture:

And my big belief is teaching them respect. If they don't respect themselves, they won't respect others. That's the way that I was brought up. Mum taught me a lot about culture

and I believe we have to bring it into the school, to teach our kids today because that respect thing has gone out the door and we need to bring it back.

Mara, one of the teachers in the induction program believed that the knowledges that young people feel the need to be validated and respected:

In terms of engaging the kids [here] we do a lot of stuff here out of the classroom, off the campus, like go out bush, fishing and stuff. You would be amazed at the knowledge that these kids have outside the classroom! I learn a lot more from them. We are doing, for example, a bush tucker garden at the moment. We are trying to set up a bush tucker garden out there. Some of them are happy to go for the drive or whatever. But a few of them already know what a lot of the stuff is.

In a similar vein, Max, a drama teacher, pointed to the need to appreciate what the young people brought to the school: 'let them have a voice ... give them respect [but] most of all *listen* to them.

Although the work requires a lot of energy and dedication, the teachers at Mulhi FLC appeared to love their work. Co-head of campus, Patrick described his sense of satisfaction from working there:

Ah, yeah, yeah, it's been really fulfilling, challenging, to say the least. But it's been fulfilling.

[Q.] What's fulfilling about it?

I think just being able to be a person that these young people can come to and just talk to. They feel that you respect them, despite how they treat you. They might treat you, like, really terrible, but they know there is a sense of safety being around you; they know that they are in safe hands; that you are not going to react in an inappropriate way. So they feel safe to vent (laughs) ... Yeah, I'm proud to say that I work here.

Conclusions

There are clearly many similarities among these three Flexible Learning Centres in terms of their approach to helping young people who have not been able to access the kinds of support they need within mainstream schooling settings. They all provided practical and sometimes assistance; an egalitarian, nurturing environment; individualised learning pathways; and a values' framework, the 'Four Principles': Respect, Participation, Safe & Legal and Honesty which are embedded in various ways within each site as, for example, the '4 Rs' – rights, respect, relationships and responsibilities. This framework allowed teachers and workers to discard the 'rules mentality' that characterises so much of mainstream schooling; and it facilitated conversations with young people about the mutual obligations of communities.

Of significance, here, are the different ways each school sought to implement a very similar framework according to the needs of each group of young people in their specific areas. The differing geolocations of these schools highlight the impact of 'place' as a significant factor that must be accounted for when responding to the needs of marginalised young people. For example, the students at Victoria Meadows, within their highly urbanised context, had access to a great variety of educational programs including in music and the arts; they were treated as young adults in terms of managing their attendance and schoolwork; attending a school in a major city meant that they could find a greater sense of belonging instead of being ostracized for 'being different'; and, there was an abundance of transport possibilities. In contrast, the students from Seabreeze whose lives were juxtaposed beside extremes of wealth and privilege on the tourist strip were subject to intense scrutiny from their local community. The school responded by focusing on many ways to build the self-esteem of their students so as to break down this sense of alienation. Due to the generally younger clientele, there was a strong focus on pastoral care provided by the school in order to build

‘common ground’ and establish the sense of community that was lacking in the broader context of their lives. What became evident as we gathered data across Queensland was that such community disconnections, along with attendant issues of schooling disengagement, increase with geographical distance from major urban areas of the state. Thus, the young people at Mulhi faced significant economic and social alienation from their small mining community along with geographical isolation and the lack of personal choices that may flow from living in very remote parts of Australia when one has few material resources to call upon. They had to contend with an historical legacy of racism. In responding to the specifics of this location, the staff at Mulhi drew upon the following resources: the Bridge Program; their local Indigenous community of elders; a number of mini-buses to collect students in the morning and take them home in the afternoon; and, an intensification of other material resources and supports.

These three FLCs were all co-educational. We now turn to two case studies of alternative schools that have attempted to respond to the needs of boys and girls separately.



Part B: Single-sex schools: Fernvale Education Centre and Lorem School

Fernvale Education Centre and Lorem School, provide case study examples of attempts to address the issues of educational disengagement via the provision of single-sex schooling. Fernvale is a girls only school and Lorem is boys only. The relative merits of single-sex and co-educational schools is a debate that continues to engender multiple perspectives. Within the research literature there is a diversity of viewpoints; this is a topic that we do not have the scope to explore in depth in this report. However, we are of the view that the complexities of this debate warrant further attention and do require some comment.

Fernvale aimed to re-engage girls for whom mainstream education had not worked for various reasons, for example: pregnancy and parenthood; economic circumstances; and personal challenges such as mental illness. Many of the girls identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, along with a variety of other backgrounds and, as a result, there was a strong focus on Indigenous perspectives and cultural inclusivity. The school's website proclaimed: 'We provide extra assistance to assist the young women to get through any barriers that may result in them disengaging from school, including the provision of a school crèche for students who are mothers, meals, a flexible curriculum and individual support when required'.

Fernvale Education commenced in 1997 in a house in suburban Brisbane as an initiative of a Christian organisation. The program was designed originally to provide a range of services, including education, to young women who were in Care and Protection or who were at risk of coming into Care of the Department of Families. The program started with seven young women, a teacher, and a part time youth worker. The young women were enrolled with the Brisbane School of Distance Education. As well as an education program Life skills, Personal Development and recreational activities were offered. In 2002 the school relocated to its current location and the following year a charitable organisation provided a crèche near the school to support pregnant girls and young mothers who wished to complete their secondary education. In order to facilitate the work of the school, the Christian organisation purchased property next to the school's current location. Fernvale had been one of the schools that we had researched for the previous YANQ report of engagement, and we draw on some of the data from that work. At the time of the current research, plans were being finalised to move into the new building mid 2014 in order to accommodate the addition of year 7 students who commenced in 2014.

Apart from the gender differences, Fernvale Education and Lorem School differed in terms of size. Keeping enrolments relatively low was intentional on the part of the latter as they aimed to respond to the needs of many boys who had been excluded, expelled or suspended multiple times from mainstream schools. They also received boys who had had to leave the mainstream because of anxiety and severe bullying. Fernvale provided for the full suite of age groups in both junior and senior secondary school (i.e. 12-17 years of age) whilst Lorem specialised in enrolments from middle primary and junior secondary schools (i.e. 9-15 years of age).

The concept for the Lorem School had its origins in the work of a philanthropist and businessman, who with the help of two clinical psychologists established a registered charity in 1990. This charity aimed to provide 'residential care to young teenagers 'at risk' before they slipped further into a 'street kids' living mode'. Recognition of the educational needs of these children led to the establishment of the first Lorem School (our case study) which was established in 1998. The school campus used a restored heritage-listed 'Queenslander' on land near a major coastal centre.

Fernvale Education

Carol (13 year old student): We are like a big family here ... Like, here it's like, 'Oh, yeah, we are all - like, we are all human, we all make mistakes'. So we just have to find a way together to get along, eventually, we will connect. I don't know ... we are just like family.

This school demonstrated a very strong philosophical base that was derived from an ethos of care and democratic principles: According to its founding school principal:

We drew on an eclectic mix of research. Democratic Education Theory and the Community Access School concepts were central to our approach. All students at the school are treated with *unconditional positive regard*. The success of this model is based on the development of trusting relationships with these young people who have been let down so often by other significant adults in their lives. Our challenge was to create a democratic school with a warm and friendly atmosphere where young people felt welcome and where their input into curriculum development and school organization was valued.

As such, for the girls and young women who attended Fernvale, the school provided a second chance for them to reconnect with education, their community and, most importantly, with themselves. Most of these students had experienced a wide range of difficult life circumstances that previously left little room for schooling. Along with early pregnancies, some had experienced various levels of abuse, homelessness, mental health issues and school transience. According to the health coordinator and GP in the school, Janice:

I think mental health issues, so anxiety, depression, feelings of disengagement from society in general in young people; lack of motivation, loss of focus of where they are going, that sort of thing. These are increasing. Also, substance abuse, which has always been a problem but now we are seeing the 12/13-year-olds that are being affected by substances.

Janice connected the students at Fernvale to the health and welfare services that they needed. As indicated earlier, there was also a very high proportion of Indigenous students at the school; and, a real sense of community has been built through Fernvale's inclusive policy towards past students, parents, carers, family members and especially Indigenous Elders. Such people were welcome visitors with many (e.g. Elders) being able to contribute to the cultural life of the school. Flexibility in respect of elements of attendance and dress rules underpinned the flow of the daily activities so that the students could find solutions to any personal issues and thus create a more focused context for learning:

Megan (student): it's okay - even if you come into a lesson halfway through because you've been doing something with the counsellor or you had to talk to the principal or something - it'll just be like, okay that's okay, we're doing this, let's catch up on that (and) it doesn't matter what you look like as long as you do your work.

What made this school special in the eyes of many of the young women was that they were able to find a soft place to land after confronting the challenges of early pregnancy and experiencing the rejection of mainstream providers who were told were unable or simply unwilling to accommodate pregnant schoolgirls. Just down the road from the main campus was the school crèche and it was viewed as a perfectly normal aspect of the school. In describing Fernvale, one of the students, Sienna, said: 'I think it's like basically a normal everyday school but you've got mums mixing with the young ones as well'. This crèche and all the parenting support that goes with it were key material supports for many Fernvale students.

Material support for students

Sienna (student): They've got a crèche which makes it awesome ... youth workers that will help you with Centrelink ... can get you counsellors, if like you have a problem with your parents or your partner or you need a home or something she'll help you do that ... I had help to leave a domestic violence relationship ..

At Fernvale, the young women who were pregnant or already mothers were welcomed and supported in non-judgemental ways. This stood in contrast to their previous experiences. For instance, Megan explained: 'I was pregnant and wasn't allowed to return to X College because... I was going into Grade Twelve and they said that I'd start a fad for the younger children to all come to school pregnant!' We also heard stories of Fernvale providing practical assistance to the young women in their preparations for their babies. As Megan went on to tell us: 'They actually gave me a list of everything I'm gonna need to buy before the baby comes and it was just like, 'whoa this is a massive list' but I got it all. Like they even helped some of the girls actually get baby stuff, like, because some people can't afford it so they actually help them and it's good'.

Having the crèche accessible to the main campus meant that the young mothers continued to feel connected to their babies and children:

Marie (student): Well, the crèche is where all the mothers go and, like, they can usually go down there whenever they feel like they need to. The crèche ladies there are really nice and - yeah, they are nice people.

[Q.]How is that an important part of the school?

Marie: Well, the mothers here wouldn't be able to go to school, really, if they didn't have crèche to support it and help them as well. All the mothers are nice.

According to one of the teachers at the school, supporting the girls through their pregnancies allowed them to develop strength and a determination to succeed for the sake of their children:

Nerissa: We have seen some of the girls come to school; then go away, have their babies and then come back as mums. And the kind of - the thing that motherhood brings them is that added maturity, because they have to be responsible for this little person now.

The school also provided out-of-term support for the students by running a holiday program which included outings to places of interest.

Fernvale had strong links to external services that assisted their students with a variety of life issues. These include: *Headspace*; Youth Housing reintegration Service; Reconnect; Youth and Family Service (YFS); Mpower Program; COPMI Art Therapy and Kalwyn Family Support. At the school, the health and well-being of the students was of the utmost concern. Health-coordinator, Janice described the work she did:

I am a general practitioner. I do the coordination of the program. I liaise with other services to get them in. Basically, I set up health programs to make sure that all of the girls' physical, mental and parenting needs are catered for. That involves bringing outside health practitioners into the school to do on-site clinics because the girls, if they are sick or if they have got a chronic illness or they need contraception or they need to talk about their mental health or whatever, to go to a doctor outside of school means taking a whole day off school; and even if they can get there in the first place. By having the services on the school

premises; the girls can come to school, and just duck in, have an appointment and get straight back to class.

Other practical assistance came in the form of the necessities of life such as food along with support staff in the kitchen who allowed the students to cook, learn some basic skills and settle into the school. Janice outlined this system:

The students are provided with breakfast and lunch every day. So we have a cook who works in the kitchen and we let the students go in and help her cook, some of the students who aren't settled in class. A lot of kids who come and enrol because they have been disengaged for sometimes long periods of time - sometimes two years - they are not school ready at all. They come in and they have breakfast and then we might find an art project for them to do or we send them to the kitchen, where they can help to make their school lunches. They learn teamwork and organisational skills and numeracy and skills like that in the kitchen. So it's a transition back into school. And then eventually, when they are ready, we will take them to a couple of classes, maybe a maths/English class. Abi will often go and sit with them and until they get more engaged in it.

And, youth workers supported them in every class:

Yes, every class has a youth worker who is assigned to that class. We have got about eight youth workers, but they do different things. Abi is the youth and family support person, so she works with the community a lot and going out to family homes and doing home visits and things like that. And each class has a youth worker that stays with that class all day and gets to know those kids that year and maintains that contact.

School climate: environmental and relational factors

Maya (student): Like, it doesn't matter where you are going or what road you take, there're always people there and, like, you are not alone...

Fernvale had a commitment to social justice. Its underpinning philosophy of 'Unconditional Positive Regard' informed all relationships and practices at the centre: One of the students, Amy explained how she experienced it in the classroom:

Just the teachers actually care, they're not just like; do you work, do you homework – once you're out of my classroom, you know, that's it! I'm not going to follow up on you, like that's as far as the extent of my care for you. But at Fernvale it's like, you know, they'll come and talk to you and check up on how you're doing. Like if you don't understand something they'll come and help you and it's just, they're more supportive I think as well...

Another student, Emily, described the 'unconditional' nature of the care and support provided to students, even when they were not being as cooperative as they should: 'They don't judge you by what is happening in your home life ... like, if you're not doing your work they'll send you to talk to the counsellor or if you're being disruptive you go talk to [the principal] and find out what the problem is'.

There were many extra-curricular activities that fostered positive relationships within the school community while helping the girls build confidence and self-esteem. For example, swimming carnivals had a focus on having fun and participation rather than serious competition:

Carol (student): (Laughs). It's really fun. Other schools will have a competition. With us, we just go and have fun and it is a day to just chill, relax with everyone; instead of seeing

everyone as, like, teachers and - like, we do still see them as teachers at swimming carnivals and that but it's more in a relaxed environment.

Students and staff at Fernvale addressed everyone by their first names. What appeared to be central was not the students' dress or appearance, the titles of teachers, or even students' ability to meet deadlines, but their willingness to engage in a community of learners in partnership with teachers. As with other alternative sites we visited, it was not uncommon for students to travel considerable distances to attend the school. For example, Sienna, who had two small children, noted: 'It takes me two and a half hours to get here!'

Caring about the young people individually was a strength of Fernvale. When asked what the school offered the girls, Nerissa stated: 'It gives them a face ... it's because of the positive regard policy that we have here, even when you walk in you know, "Hello, how are you, it's great to see you here. I haven't seen you for a few days it's great that you're back" '. Terms like 'family' and 'community' were used commonly across interviews with both staff and students.

Pedagogy and curriculum

Megan (student): So I want to go to uni and get like a degree 'cause ... like, there's community services can go into a Cert II or a diploma or stuff like that so I want to go and get my degree. But I want to start off being, like, a counsellor and then slowly work up to being a child psychologist

Fernvale Education Centre offered a standard curriculum that incorporated the Australian Curriculum, school based traineeships and TAFE courses, vocational education, tertiary/tertiary preparation courses, work experience and career planning activities. There was a strong Indigenous focus within this curriculum due to the large number of Indigenous girls attending the school. Teacher, Nerissa supported the girls during their interviews. In the following exchange she helped Ella explain how the art curriculum, Indigenous knowledges and community connections work holistically for this school:

[Q.] What about the school's commitment to Indigenous issues?

Ella: Uhm, well, it is not really a commitment. It is a lifestyle, I guess. It is constantly there. Like, we have a class dedicated to Indigenous studies and whatnot. Last year, we went on camp and one of the main focuses was the Indigenous studies because we did sandwork with Uncle.

Nerissa: Ephemeral art ...

Ella: Yeah, that's it, sand art and stuff. Oh, okay, we did these paintings - not paintings - we made these pictures out of sand, like, different coloured sand and stuff. When the tide came in, like, it kind of washed it and blended it altogether. By the time the tide fully came in and went back out, it was all gone but the sand had become one, I guess, with the sand that was already on the beach. So it was kind of about not recycling but just being one. Even though you can make something so beautiful, you are not wasting it or whatever. It is gone back to where it belongs.

Nerissa: Yeah, the conversations we had, too, while we were doing it. We were talking about why we did this particular animal or stuff like that; just little bits and pieces. Every now and again. It's cool. We have Indigenous elders that come in when we have yarnning day. That's cool. We go in their sewing circles and stuff. It's very much about the community and elders and stuff here.

Nerissa viewed her cultural background as important aspects of her practice:

I really believe that a lot of the teachings of my old people, the elderly that I grew up with and worked with, the lessons, the knowledge, the information, the respect that they taught me, have helped me to establish myself here and I think that even though the girls may come from homes, how can I explain this, even though we think that the girls don't understand about some of those things, I think that deep down inside there, there's ninety-nine percent of them understand the key concept of *respect*... and I think that we're able to tap into it. We have, the girls go to the elder's sewing circle on Wednesdays. They've got that connection there and this year's theme for NAIDOC is honouring our elders, 'honouring our elders – nurturing our youth'. So we're really tapping into that whole philosophy here at the school.

It was not just her knowledge of Indigenous issues and ways of life that were perceived to be important, but also her experiences. She made a point of drawing upon her own background and that of earlier generations to motivate the students and to make them see the importance of education for Indigenous people:

And I say to the girls, you know, 'It's amazing that if I had been born a little bit earlier I may not have even been here at this school', you know just because of the colour of my skin and because of people's rights to education. We have a right to this and so if we can be here and we've got a right then let's do it properly – let's give it our best.

In curriculum studies the students were encouraged to make links between their assessment tasks and their heritage:

Carol (student): Yes, you had to create a newspaper cover and it had to be something to do with, like, the Indigenous events that we have throughout the year. And I did Mabo day and we stuck it on the noticeboard and I was like, "Wow", I was proud of myself. It was up for a while; I was so proud of myself. He's kind of related to me, kinda, so I am very happy that I got to write about something which includes my culture, heritage.

However, teachers also used many other ways of making connections between the curriculum and the interests of the students as described by teacher Nerissa:

So we have looked at History through fashion, this term. So looked at all the things that influenced fashion, the historical events. So the girls have been learning about the events but also looking at how fashion has influenced. So it was just a different perspective on history.

Regina, the art teacher, emphasised her teaching philosophy of relevance, connectivity and scaffolding for different learning styles:

I think a lot of learners learn more visually and tactile and 10 percent are oral and reading handouts ... you could need to scaffold and show examples of what you want them to do ... And it needs to be relevant. And giving them options. I do, say, a project in junior, where they do a little mixed media painting and they choose a shoe; a shoe that is symbolic to them. I tell them mine is thongs. So they will have stilettos, boots, whatever; choose whatever. They find pictures of them, print them out and then I show them mix media background. They draw them, collage them on and then just add more mix media to it and

then write a little reflection about that shoe. So that sort of thing. They love it. They engage with it because it's *their* shoe.

This focus on personally 'meaningful' learning underpinned the extracurricular framework of the school leading to their participation in relevant community events such as a multicultural fashion parade; Harmony Day events; NAIDOC Week celebrations; youth projects and community forums; an Elders' sewing circle; camps and excursions; theatre, dance and music; and running a café at the children's court in Brisbane city. Biennially, the school publishes a book of student art, poetry and short stories. On the alternate year, they hosted an art exhibition where student works were displayed and were available for purchase.

True to its founding philosophy, Fernvale also had a focus on active citizenship and democratic social engagement by encouraging the girls to represent the school in forums such as the Indigenous Youth Forum, Lord Mayor's Forum, Youth Parliament, Peace Parliament and Education Conferences. Ella, a student, recounted some of her experiences in answer to the following question.

[Q.] What are the school's views on 'making a difference' [to society]?

Highly, highly, highly encouraged. Like, there's a little function thing that's in (neighbouring suburb) every year called *Stylin Up* and every single year the school has a stall there and we sell, like, jewellery or - some of the girls make snacks and cookies and things to help raise money for the school, and for some other things. Some of the girls get together and we do a performance on the big stage and stuff ... Like, we put ourselves out there and show that even though we are a tiny school, and even though we may not get all the praise or have the reputation that we want, like, we are still there; we are still going to be there; and we are still going to put our hand up for things and get amongst it because that's what type of school we are.

There was a flexible approach to participation so that students become engaged when they were ready. One student, Marie said:

Well, they would really love for everyone to participate but if you don't want to participate, they are fine with that anyway. And, like, even if you just sit and watch, they are happy with that ... They just make you, like, you want to be there. They will encourage you. But if you don't want to go to class, you can just go out and do a different subject.

The positive relationships evident at this school underpinned the pedagogical approaches of the teachers as noted by student Amy: 'They'll come (teachers/workers) and talk to you and check up on how you're doing. Like if you don't understand something they'll come and help you and it's just, they're more supportive'. The opportunity to provide such personal attention, however, was facilitated by the size of the school and its classes. As is the case in most other alternative schools, lower than mainstream numbers allowed for smaller class sizes: 'Like, the classrooms are half the size from a normal school. So you get more one-on-one time with the teacher. Because the classes are smaller, you also get to know more people and know how they are feeling and - yeah' (Marie, student):

Finally ...

Ella (student): No matter which direction you go in life, there's no evading the inevitable; death. Life can be a dark and scary place, like I have learned, but it can also be wondrous and beautiful, like I have seen and felt. To learn and live life to the fullest and be real, honest and true to yourself, because in the end that's all you have (note on one of her art pieces).

When we recently spoke to Claire, the current principal of Fernvale, we were struck by her eloquence and deep commitment to the school. In this final section, we therefore present a themed overview of the reflections she shared with us in her interview.

'What works': Junior Secondary

Claire indicated that there were core teachers for grades 7, 8 and 9. They try to have these teachers teach multiple subjects which are based around the notion of 'rich tasks' (see Lingard and McGregor, 2014; Mills and McGregor, 2016). This was because, she said, 'the students tend to like that idea, 'I am doing something with a theme and everything is related to that theme''. She also thought that it was important to do work that connected to their worlds:

So doing real things. So the excursion to the supermarket, where we look at prices and we look at 'how much is the unit price and how much is the cost of the item', and they are doing some practical things. 'I need to buy how much flour and sugar and milk and butter to make a cake?', and then we make the cake, so that they can see that it's coming into practicality. So it's doing some of those things that help to engage them. *If they don't see a purpose to their learning, they are really not engaged.*

She was also of the view that the students coped much better when they had only one teacher setting boundaries for them rather than multiple teachers setting different boundaries. She thought that this was particularly beneficial for those young people who lived in chaotic environments where boundaries were often indeterminate. For her then one of the key principles was: *'having one particular teacher and having the students in that small group there is very important'.*

'What works': Understanding and support

Claire stressed the importance of all of the workers, teachers and others, knowing the students and what was going on in their lives. She noted that 'We have some girls who, perhaps, would easily drift away from school, if there wasn't the constant contact'. Thus whenever a student was away the core teacher, or pastoral care teacher, would call them, she stressed that it was not done as a behavioural mechanism, but as a support. This person:

...will phone them and say, 'Are you okay? Do you need any help'? It is not a matter of being in trouble, 'You are ruining our attendance data', or something like that. *It is about, 'What can we do to help you to finish, because you said you want to finish, so how can we do that? What more do you need in the way of support?'*

This element of support was grounded in their approach of 'unconditional, positive regard. She noted how many of the girls had been in trouble in their previous schools and that they were often singled out by teachers and 'not allowed to forget it in the classroom'. She went on to say:

They are embarrassed and, of course, at that age, of puberty and adolescence, that is a very sensitive issue, to be embarrassed by what people are saying. So that's why we work on the unconditional, positive regard. *So our teachers will give respect to our students, even if they are not returning that, because every day is a fresh start; and you can always make a new choice, a new change.*

A key feature of the school is the support it gives to girls who are either pregnant or parenting. They had a crèche facility and ran pregnant and parenting programs during sport time, to help the girls with their babies now or in the future. This was a core feature of their philosophy of 'clearing the path for learning'. This Claire felt was not happening in some other schools, indeed she suggested that the opposite was often the case. She told us that many of the girls indicated, as some did to us,

that they had been asked to leave their previous schools. For her this was an injustice: *'It's not a disease; it's quite a natural thing. To me, that is discrimination, but that's another matter.'*

The support they offered students extended to the classwork and the raising of levels of expectation. They also endeavoured to encourage support amongst the student body. As Claire stated:

For some of our students, it's a bit more about giving them a sense of 'it's real; we are a community; we work together; we support one another', and it's that constant bolstering and encouragement that, 'Yes, you can achieve and you can do it'. *It's finding their area of interest and working with the individual until they find what they are interested in.* That might mean trying out five different lots of work experience or it might mean swapping a few subjects here and there for them.

What works: Flexibility

The flexibility that Claire alludes to in the above comments about work experience and subject choice extended to the area of assessment, an area in which there is often little flexibility in schools. For example, she told us:

Also, the assessment policies that are recommended for senior secondary these days, say 'if you don't hand something in on the due date, you get nothing for it'. And that says, 'Well, all the hard work you have done - if you had a crisis the night before and you just haven't got it finished, you get nothing, for all the hard work you have done'. So we don't have that sort of policy. *We have a policy that students can work until the time that they are ready to complete and if they have had a hard term, then the next term they can go back and still catch up that work, to enable them to be able to finish.*

Fernvale Education Centre attempted to provide support for girls and young women who, often in addition to other life issues, were also experiencing challenges specifically related to gender and gender and race. These included pregnancy, child care, and other caring responsibilities. Some of the students had experienced domestic violence in their relationships, some sexual violence and others discrimination because of their pregnancy. For many of these young women, their experiences were compounded by racial discrimination. Whilst the debates about single sex schooling tend to focus on academic achievement, and often highlight how well single sex (mostly middle class) schools do academically (see for example, Mills 2004), there is no doubt that Fernvale provided a safe environment in which these young women could learn and which took into account issues of gender discrimination. There were no essentialist elements here to the school's organisation based on girls' supposed natural ways of being, thinking and doing, instead the focus on girls had a much broader conception of gender injustice.

The boys who attended Lorem School struggled with mental health issues and, it seemed, associated problems of 'how to be male' with some being the victims of severe bullying and others the perpetrators of such violence. Whilst it could be argued that Fernvale was engaged in a political project seeking to challenge a misogyny firmly embedded in society's structures, Lorem appeared to be engaged in a much more therapeutic enterprise.



Lorem School

Andre (student): The school is very different in its teaching. You do learn but they try to teach you social skills. Most of the kids that go here aren't really good with social skills and keeping their anger under control and they just lose it very easily. So the teachers here try to teach you how to be less angry and how to have more social skills and make more friends.

Lorem School began as a co-educational institution but apparently tensions among the boys and girls led to the change to boys only. A number of the staff commented on this issue. Typical perspectives are represented by the following observations:

Milan: They have got a whole lot of needs already. They are young people/kids trying to address their own needs as well as the male/female difference. It is probably just chucking another spanner in the works. I think having all boys is beneficial.

Marshall: The level of escalation for boys, hormonal boys, when there's a female? They have attachment issues and crushes and their hormones go crazy when we have female staff in the room. It's hard enough to make a group of boys accept each other for who they are and not be afraid to be seen as a failure, let alone if there was the opposite sex to also be put in that mix ... To have a girl the same age of them even walk past, the boys will not sit and continue listening. They would run to the window, yell stuff out, and they are very, very inappropriate around females. They have never been taught etiquette and they have never been taught - definitely not chivalry. We have tried to explain to them what that actually is and how you actually talk around women differently and you talk to them differently. And even that concept alone - and again, addressing their access to the Internet and addressing their belief of what females actually are ... A sister school, potentially ... could be put in as a reward system, where we could meet up, a day, where we go and do competition, team building games, the boys' school versus the girls' schools, so they can look forward to it, you know.

Thus many Lorem staff held the view that teaching boys in a single-sex environment enabled them to address behaviours and learning needs more effectively than if girls were present.

At the time of our research visits, the school operated on a philosophy called 'Educare'. According to their documents, the origin of this word is Greek and means 'to bring forth'. It is a metaphor for the work carried out there. In their own words this means: 'By emphasising good character above all else, we at Lorem endeavour to develop inside the hearts and minds of our students an understanding of their own needs ... the teaching of character via human values and virtues provides the rationale and language so students can share what they learn with classmates, families and communities'. To this end, each teacher was required to be a role model for students in respect of: Love, Peace, Truth, Non-violence and Right-conduct. The whole school community engaged in daily meditation, reflections and affirmations around these values. In respect of gender, the school provided a balance of male and female staff to engender a sense of 'family'. According to their documents, 'while the boys identify with the males (staff), they need to relate to the female staff with respect. Students witness first-hand positive relationships between adult men and women'. Points were awarded for doing well in various activities and these could be 'cashed in' for a variety of privileges, including a broader range of treats for lunch.

Material support for students

Sid (student): If you go to the train station, you get dropped off. So your parents have to do that. The bus comes and picks you up and drops you off here.

Lorem used school buses to transfer and collect boys from the train station. They were provided with a nutritious lunch each day and engaged the students in making it. Weekly outings might include: BMX; visits to the beach; working with horses at 'Harmony Hooves'; training dogs at the Animal Welfare League and various types of community service.

The students came with a variety of issues: some were previously deemed to be bullies while others were the victims of bullying; some suffered from anxiety, depression and other mental illnesses; others had been labelled with learning and behavioural challenges such as "ADHD" or "Autism Spectrum Disorder" (ASD) – or any combination of these:

Thomas: I was kicked out of my first mainstream school when I was 11 years old ...

Charlie: I was kicked out of my high school because I was bullied a lot ...

[Q.] *So they kicked you out?*

Yeah, because I was bullied a lot and I beat them up. And I got here, like, last term, near the start of the year

Larry: I got kicked - expelled out of [previous school] twice...once for a term and then got expelled for kicking this guy's head in. Been here for about two/three months.

The work with the horses and dogs was intentionally therapeutic as a way of helping the boys to be more patient and empathetic. Stuart, the Special Needs teacher supported them by embedding what he called 'coping strategies' in the curriculum: 'At this school we have got 11/12 diagnosed in some way ... In the classroom that I am teaching, we try to put the children with [diagnosed] special needs in that classroom, so that we can - I am trained in that. We have got probably a few more resources in there'.

Another practical way that Lorem School tried to support the boys in their emotional development was through regular community service. Weekly activities included feeding the homeless, collecting rubbish from parks and waterways and helping the 'intellectually impaired'. Whilst challenging for many of the young people who were strongly focussed on their own problems, this approach aimed to reposition the boys so that they could recognise their *own* capacity to make a positive difference *to others* and to the world around them; this approach was based on attempts to bolster self-esteem and confidence within a context of understanding the needs of other people: this flowed into the strong focus on relational work done at the school.

School climate: environmental and relational factors

Sid (student): I am 12 at the end of the year. I moved to this school because at my old school, I used to get bullied way too much. People used to bash me and some guy threatened to stab me. So I come here and it's actually the best high school or, like, school ever, I reckon. It's awesome.

Helen had been at the school for nine years and, like the other members of staff, she covered a variety of 'job descriptions':

I have been here for a long time. This is my ninth year. I have pretty much done everything. At the moment I am working in the junior class as a youth worker. For me, I do all the grocery shopping, all the food preparation. So I run the kitchen and then I work in the classroom as well.

Her attitude towards the students was typical of the relational elements that make this school 'work'. She had empathy and compassion for the boys along with an understanding of some of their problems and ways of addressing them:

Oh, I love the kids, hey. You get to know them and you get to care about them. I spent 18 years teacher aiding at [another school]. That was really good training ground because I did one-on-one with kids; we had funding. I really like it, but in mainstream you can't get that relationship happening; here you can. The kids will just open up. If you treat them positively, even though they might be spitting in your face, they learn to understand that they can trust you and that's basically how I go about it. 'You can say whatever you like, do whatever you like, but tomorrow I will smile at you.' Even though in my head I am going [makes crazy sign] ... (laughs). For me, every kid needs boundaries because otherwise they don't feel safe. So I will try and be consistent in everything...

Youth worker and teacher Milan described how the school's relational framework supported the boys: 'In my seven weeks sitting here as a teacher, I think what the school really does is give the kids an opportunity to really find inner peace and try and provide an opportunity for these kids to re-build their self-esteem, to be able to feel somewhat successful when they are sitting amongst their peers'.

The boys were also very appreciative of the patient care they received as noted here by Thomas:

Well, the school is smaller and we just cope. The teachers are understanding; always kind. And there's more male teachers. And they get us. They just get - Like, if we are angry, they either take us out and talk to us, like, try and see what's happened.

Such care also extended to supporting the learning needs of each student.

Pedagogy and curriculum

Alissa (teacher): It is very creative, I suppose. It's a lot of - well, I guess creative again - trying to organise things to engage them in a non-usual way.

The school aimed to have no more than 80 enrolments. Because of the nature of the needs of the boys attending Lorem, Graham, the principal, believed that, ideally, staff/student ratio should be in the order of 1:5 or 1:6. General teachers had two youth workers to assist them and the Special Needs class had two teachers and one youth worker.

On their arrival at Lorem, the boys' academic levels were assessed and teachers had the flexibility to differentiate elements of the Australian curriculum to address learning gaps and cater to individual needs. Students had an individual learning plan that was reviewed at least twice a year. There was a focus on literacy and numeracy with the remainder of the curriculum being delivered in a learning area called 'Integrated Studies'. Drawing upon theories of multiple intelligences, Lorem School aimed to develop ways of 'knowing' other than just the intellectual: emotional, spiritual and relational (for example). Evidence of what this looked like in practice may be noted in activities structured around hands-on learning such as gardening, cooking, painting, or music; according to school documentation, these tasks 'are transformed into spiritual activities when they are performed mindfully, lovingly and caringly'. To help the boys develop such peaceful habits of mind, the school had engaged the services of a consultant for the 'Reboot' program. This person supported staff well-being and provided resources and workshops for students to assist them in understanding human responses to certain situations in order to develop resilience and appropriate responses rather than counterproductive behaviours such as violence, bullying or social avoidance.

Addressing behavioural issues was a strong focus of all aspects of the school, including the curriculum as outlined here by teacher Stuart:

So it's all of those, every single one of them. What we do, when we do - for example, if we are doing English, within English, we make sure within that class, they are also having to pair with somebody, so they are learning that social/emotional skills, which they do not have. They can't get along with adults; can't get along with same age and like-minded peers. We try to cover as much as we can in all of - when we have got English we try to cover many different facets, without teaching them new concepts.

Staff believed that having consistent routines embedded in their environment helped the boys with anxiety. According to Milan: 'And so they are actually sitting in class; they have got a book in front of them; they are engaging. They are wanting to finish work; they are wanting to do work. So I think that's - for some of them who have high anxiety or learning difficulties, for them to be able to do that, we are moving forward for them'.

As noted by Helen, in the introductory quote to this section, teachers had to be innovative in terms of their pedagogy so as to connect to the interests of the boys and thus deliver the curriculum. Here she explained further: 'I am the Head of curriculum here as well, so I try and base the entire curriculum on things that the kids are interested in. So if we are doing maths, we might be building a go-cart, rather than doing a normal algebra worksheet or something like that'.

In classes where students were all at different levels, teacher Alissa used different strategies to cover the same content. For example: 'So we might start off with something like [unclear on recording] and someone has to build it where another student might just have to draw it, and someone else do a graph ... depending on their capability'.

According to Alissa, skillful differentiation of the curriculum at Lorem School yielded good results for the boys both in terms of their learning and also their behaviour:

A lot of them, because they are not at their capability for academic [demands], they go into mainstream class, they can't do the work, so they just react behaviour-wise. They get in all this trouble. One of the boys that you met from my class, his 'rap' is nine pages long about how he was so violent at school and whatnot. I have not seen any of it. He's the most perfect child in my class. It's just because he's learning at his capability. He's still being challenged and he's not being bullied. So it makes a massive difference for him.

In responding to the needs of students with "ASD", Alissa noted:

With the special needs classrooms, the teacher needs to be a special needs specialist, I suppose. It can't just be a teacher that's taken out somewhere and put in there. Also, there needs to be someone that does understand autism. There're so many different things/levels to the autism. You can have someone who is level 1 and level 5; there's someone who can't be in a car that reverses, to someone who just doesn't like loud noises. There has to be a process to find out the triggers from the kids, not wait for them to happen ... [Marshall's] class is very structured and that's what they need, being autistic. So they need visual aids as well. They need to walk in and know that this is what's happening today and this is the schedule and that's sort of stuff.

The timetable for each day revolved through activities that included meals, quiet times, classroom learning, activities and communal sharing. Breakfast preceded a period of meditation before students broke into their morning classes. The day was further punctuated by a preservative-free nutritious lunch which is also followed by either quiet time or story-telling whereby students and staff focussed on a 'thought for the week'. Although quite structured, the school was also flexible

and responsive if circumstances warranted changes because of the needs of students. In sum, the schooling structures were clearly very 'student-centred'.

Finally...

Graham: We are looking at making well-being the centre of the whole philosophy of the school – for everyone, the kids and also for the staff.

In the course of our research (this project and previous) visits to a great many alternative sites, we have always been struck by the passionate advocacy of their founders. Therefore, we conclude with a few thoughts from Lorem principal, Graham about what he regards as successful features of this school in respect to the young boys who go there:

'What works': Having the right staff

He began with a consideration of staffing. He was of the view that those people who had experienced similar stories to this of the boys at the school were the wrong people for the school. He said of such people:

They come in after a few days and the kids find the chinks in their armour and they will stick the knife in and then they will start twisting and then they will come to me and say, "Look, I can't do this anymore." Or I have to say to them, 'Look, this isn't working' ... [The problem is they try to work with] ... no boundaries. No consequences, no boundaries. You know, 'it doesn't matter what they do, they are here'.

However, later, as we indicate, he sees that the youth workers who had similar backgrounds to these young people had stories worth telling. However, he did want boundaries for the students and for the workers to see that students actually coming to the school was not sufficient. He wanted them to be safe at school and to learn. This meant that teachers and other workers could not be laissez faire with the students:

You can't take them [the boys] down a creek and give them a rope, you know

He contrasted youth workers and teachers and indicated that the stereotypes of each would not function at the school:

... The big thing I find is youth workers operate from there [points to heart] and teachers operate from there [points to head] and you need people that can operate from both. [The good ones get that] ... they already there. They can see/feel it. Some teachers can't get [notions] out of their head, like, 'Respect me. I'm a teacher'. And these kids are like, 'Fuck off'.

'What works': Holistic approach to learning

The education at Lorem had a strong philosophic component to it, and what Graham referred to as 'Educare'. He explained this philosophy to us:

The Educare philosophy, it comes from 'educaro', which means to 'draw forth from without' ... *you take care of the character, before you take care of the academic stuff, so it is always the heart before the brain ... you attract teachers who will take that on board and become that for students.*

He told us there were 'five tenets' to the philosophy and that the principal one was developing the young person's 'character before everything else'. Others involved role modelling and story-telling. Story telling was something they did every week:

Normally one of us takes - we take it in turn. We have got so many now, it's once a term. It's when we all get together on a Monday; we all tell a story based on the thought of the week. I try to get the new teachers because it's so foreign to them, 'Tell a story'. I say, 'make it about yourself - make it personable'. The kids half the time are like, 'Oh, wow'. When some of the youth workers start telling them about their lives and how they went off the rails and this person that brought me back, like, half the time it was a teacher. So you want them to be that teacher for these kids. So that's a big part of it.

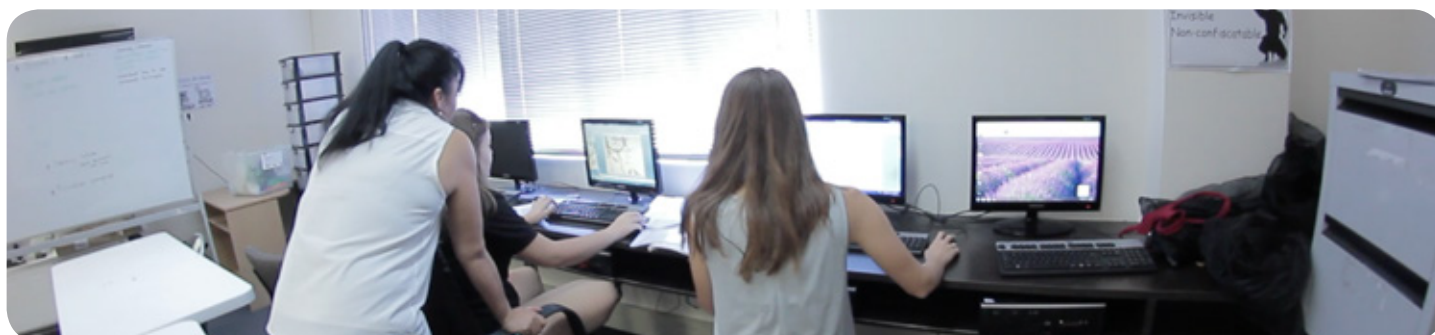
Graham also indicated that another key tenet of Educare was group activities. This included community service, rituals and group meditation, all of which we witnessed. At times it was very clear that for many of these boys they really enjoyed the opportunities for reflection, for communication and to be part of a group.

Whilst there was much to like about this school, there was no doubting the enthusiasm and care that was demonstrated by the workers to the young people in their care and that the young people liked coming to school, we did have some concerns about the gender focus. The dangers of therapeutic approaches to addressing what can be seen as problems of masculinity have been covered in-depth elsewhere (see for example, Mills 2001; Lingard, Martino and Mills, 2009). However, some of these are worth reiterating here. Such approaches which do not address issues of misogyny, homophobia and other forms of oppression which normalise dominant forms of masculinity, which are a danger to these boys and to others, are likely to be perpetuated. A strength of the school is that it does provide them with opportunities to perform caring masculinities and to see men in more caring roles. However, as research has indicated, care needs to be taken with a reliance on role model theories (Martino 2008). The boys operate in a social context where certain opportunities are available and some are closed down, simply providing alternative role models will not change that. It is the social context that needs changing which the school is endeavouring to do.

Conclusion

Fernvale Education Centre and Lorem School remind us that when working to re-engage young people in learning we must avoid a narrow focus on academic goals; we must be cognisant of the effects of discrimination and marginalisation due to race, culture and gender, and class; we must recognise the effects of entrenched social constructions of masculinity and femininity that serve to shape particular behaviours of girls and boys that may be detrimental to their well-being and/or that of others. Both schools sought to support their students to resist negative and gendered views of themselves; for example, Fernvale affirmed young mothers and provided a crèche to support them to make life choices; Lorem School assisted young boys in exploring ways of being male other than through violence, albeit without challenging the broader gender order.

We now come to our final case study site, Woodlands Flexischool. It provides a very interesting model of how the involvement of a mainstream high school coupled with strong support and advocates from the local community can combine effectively to respond to the needs of marginalised young people living in rural centres in Queensland.



Part C: School Annex model with community support: Woodlands Flexischool

The community owned - I am going to say the word "problem". I don't like the word 'problem', but that is how it initially started - the problem of disengagement, the community owned it first (Head of campus)

The history of the Woodlands Flexischool demonstrates that initially high levels of community support continue to the present. The following account is from a founding patron who worked at the local university:

Yes, there was I suppose three or four of us. Dean from the city council; Eric was with the Department of Education; he was a school counsellor. The flexischool was started for kids who could not fit into a conventional school system. Many of them had no families, some lived on the street and some had suffered sexual abuse. There wasn't a school involved at the start but there was simply - we formed a group called 'Unity Youth'. It was a place downtown where marginalised kids could drop in and have a talk. We had volunteers there.

After a period of time it became apparent that many of these young people wanted to do school. However, not being a registered school meant that the only way they could help the young people was by enrolling them in the Brisbane School of Distance Education. When the students received their materials, volunteers, including pre-service teachers from the university, worked with the students, usually one-on-one, and helped them with the study guides. He indicated that this worked for a few years:

But there was something missing. You know, and then - I am in Rotary, too. The year that I was President of Rotary, 2001, I proposed that we try and aim for this place. James - whose name is out there, he's an automotive dealer in town here. He had a used car yard and on that was an old Telstra training building. We moved it down in two bits. Rotary took it on as a major project and the city council; and we painted it. The city council gave us the land; we dropped it in on here. We still had volunteers ... We took out volunteer insurance but it was - yeah, there were so many things that could go wrong with these things. So a few of us looked around for a school where we could link it up. [The principal of the sponsor high school], she understands what this is trying to do. So we linked in with a local high school in about 2005, somewhere around that ...

The head of campus suggested that one of the school's strengths was that it was supported by three key groups in the community:

They were three key people and having the council on board, having the university on board and also Education Queensland, it was a beautiful mix. And then to get a school that was interested, it formed a very strong basis in which to then build.

At the time of our research, the Woodlands Flexischool had Community Partnerships with a local men's network, the National Australia Bank (NAB) and the local university. In 2010, its sponsor high school had won a major Queensland multicultural award for education and a *National Australia Bank Schools First Local Impact* award for the work it was doing with the Flexischool in respect of disadvantaged young people and creating inclusive learning pathways. The students came from a variety of backgrounds, including Indigenous. Many students came from very difficult family circumstance with some living independently. Shona, one of the teachers, also told us: 'So we get quite a few kids who are maybe under a psychologist's care, on medication, have had a history of, you know, the types of mental illness, like depression, anxiety, all of that.' She went on to say:

People sometimes think that flexi is a bit of a dumping ground for all of the “bad elements” and it's not They come in here and go, "Ohhhh, we can learn." I had the best time with my year 10s last year - they were just beautiful.

The school had a waiting list and tried to support those in most need. The head of campus, Judy, indicated that they gave priority to those who had very little support at home:

...when a child doesn't have anyone to build those relationships with and they are disengaging and they are depressed and anxious, that's when they need a centre like this that basically becomes their family, becomes their support; they build self-confidence, self-esteem and then they can get themselves on the right track.

When we visited in 2014, the school was receiving a lot of inquiries about their capacity to take on younger students, the head of campus noted that 'It's always been our dream to set up a junior flexi school for probably 7, 8/9'. The principal of the main school, Margaret noted: 'We are well aware of our growing waiting list over time and we are also well aware of the increasing (demand)... at a far younger age.' She went on to say: 'They are struggling in primary schools and then we pick this up in year 8, and of course, too young, too young for flexi.' The sponsor high school was, however, seeking to support these students in the early years of high school. They had introduced the 'Skills for Living Program', for three days a week. The principal told us:

We can staff that within our staffing but that means that we can actually take kids who are younger. Even if they only have two and a half, three days a week, they can at least start here; start to feel like they are belonging; start to have some of their needs addressed and then progressively come in.

This program had ten students in it. All of them had been out of school for more than a month; some were in year 10 and had not been in school since year 8. Students were selected for this program on the basis of not yet being ready or old enough for the Flexischool. They come into the Flexischool for three days a week and do a form of work experience on the other days. They primarily focussed on literacy and numeracy. However, they also did a range of other activities that included outdoor education challenges.

Material support for students

For me, it's just like home because if I miss out on breakfast, I just come here and have something to eat (Student).

An important aspect of the school was the support it provided to students on a range of matters. Some of it was quite simple like the provision of food. The head of campus, Judy, told us that whilst it was quite a simple thing it was important:

...but food; you know, children know they can come and have brekky and smell cookies baking. It is a homely smell; one of our basic needs. So they feel like, "Okay, if I go there, someone's going to chat to me, someone's going to feed me." While they are here, "okay, here's an English class" (laughs).

The school also helped students with clothing, transported some to (not from) school and supported young people with youth justice and attends Centrelink issues.

One Indigenous girl aged 16 who had had a very difficult life—her mother was in gaol and she lived with her grandmother who had a brain tumour—told a story about how she had made a decision to return to education after dropping out, and about how the school had helped her pursue her love of

dance. She explained that the principal began each year by speaking individually with the students: 'she likes to talk to the students, find out background and what they want to do and stuff. And then I explained to her, "I love dance. My goal is to get to Bangarra"⁴'. She went on to tell of how they had managed to organise for her to do her work experience with Bangarra:

And then for two months, they kept it secret, organising everything; made the phone calls. They had to ask about insurance; call up Bangarra to see if it's alright because Bangarra said they don't usually do that. So they let me do it. At the time, when Suzette called me, it was on a Friday, so we don't come to school Friday, from experience, and I had a busted arm, so whenever I would move it, it would hurt so bad. And my nan came in and she was like...so I answered the phone and they are like, 'We are going to Sydney', and I just arose from the dead and I raised my - it hurt so much, because it had stitches in it, and I nearly cried when I found out because, yeah, since - it's a pretty big thing... and I just thought, 'I'm so happy that I came back because it's just helped me so much', like in the past couple of months I have gotten so far and got my head screwed on, that I definitely want to go somewhere. If I was in any other school, I would still be like, 'Oh', you know, having doubts about it.

Using funds from their NAB Schools account, two of the teachers from the school took her to Sydney for a week to work with Bangarra as part of her work experience. At the time of our last research visit, she had an application in to a Bangarra feeder dance school in NSW for the end of year 12. She went on to say how much she loved the school and how it was 'like a family environment' and how a lot of the students came up to her to say: 'Good luck. I hope you have fun'.

School climate: environmental and relational factors

They are happy. They are really happy. People think that it can't be that simple but it is that simple! (Head of campus).

The administrators and teachers at the school worked hard to ensure that there was a positive climate in the school and positive relationships between teachers and students. However, the head of campus was at pains to tell us that this is something that should come quite easily:

People often ask me, 'What do you do?' We do nothing special. We do basic things. We do them well, but they are basic; basic, basic. You know, feeding someone; talking to someone; making a connection; asking them about their day; they are basic, basic things. It's finding the right people who care, who take that time to find a staff, and then just building the warmth around it and then they want to come.

Central to creating a positive climate in the school was the linking of students with adults with whom students could build a connection. The head of campus told us:

You want some significant person in their life to take an interest. That could be a mentor, it could be a connection with a teacher, it could be an employer.... Sometimes it can be someone quite random, who the children ... It is not always us, as the teacher. It's someone who - and that's why we link with so many groups. We link with community, Rotary, employers. A lot of employers, amazingly, take our students under their wing, and they just see something special.

There were a number of adults and support personnel in the school who were able to form these connections with students. In addition to the teachers, they had a mentoring system with a local men's organisation (see below); a health nurse; a guidance officer who comes in one day a week;

⁴ Indigenous dance company see: <http://bangarra.com.au/>

and a chaplain. The 'outreach officer', who organised the mentoring and was responsible for Indigenous engagement had a key role in the school. She originally qualified as a teacher, and then had been a police officer for 12 years. In the latter role she had worked in community policing with schools and run community education programs, particularly around domestic violence and relationship violence. She had then gone back to university to do an honours degree in psychology and was now doing a masters in social work. She was described by the principal as 'unreal'. The head of campus said: 'And those support people are really important. It gives children a different face to talk to, because not everybody is going to connect to one person but you have got lots of personalities around, lots of options'.

We were also told that the environment was so supportive that students who were gay or lesbian were able to be 'out', something that was seen as difficult in this rural town (see Section 4). This did take work, but their focus was on ensuring that everybody in the school felt safe. The head of campus informed us:

We are quite hard on bullying here and basically just, yeah, I get students to talk about it immediately, whatever is said. You know, they are encouraged to write it down, "who said it, what was said and where". Very quickly we sort of jump onto it because that's why they have come here.

All the students we spoke with praised the teachers with comments such as 'Teachers are nicer. They are not up in your face' (Ben). One boy in year 11, Corey, had been referred to the Flexischool after he had started failing at school and had 'got to the point where [he] just didn't care anymore'. He wanted us to know how good the school and the teachers were:

It's great, it really is. I don't know what it is about it. I think it is not just the one-on-one with the teachers, but more that - not that it is lenient, but it is better because the teachers are nicer. You don't have the strain of not necessarily getting into trouble but they are allowed to be themselves. They don't have to put on a face/mask and act. Here, they are themselves. They can tell you to be quiet like a normal person. They don't have to tell you, 'Sit down, stop'. They can act themselves; they can talk to us normally. It's great.

He went on to tell us that he had not been enjoying school since going into year 5, but that he had loved it up to that point, and that he hadn't 'been able to see school the same, up until now.' He was hoping to go to university to do science: 'I really love science. It's one of my biggest passions. Always talking about it, facts, information, everything. I enjoy space, chemistry, physics, everything.'

As within all communities tensions arose from time to time. This same boy, Corey, described an incident after some students had been 'mucking up' in maths and the teacher had said to the head of campus that they 'had lost the meaning of flexischool' which had 'crushed her'. Following this she ran an 'hour long session' with them 'talking about what flexi was and why we were here... and then after that, it's pretty much stopped because Judy took immediate action on it. Didn't let it pass.'

Pedagogy and curriculum

First of all, before we even went to the curriculum, we wanted to make this place a place where they feel welcomed and they feel connected (Head of campus)

The school was focussed on providing the students with a rich and rigorous curriculum. However, the quality of the environment was seen as being central to allowing this to happen in ways that would engage the students. The head of campus, Judy, explained: 'Because once you build a relationship, they will do anything for you. Then you build the curriculum. So you have got to build the connection first and you have got to make the place welcoming'. This, she argued, required high

quality teachers: 'If a teacher can't cut it in mainstream, they are not going to cut it here.' As a consequence the teachers were hand-picked from the main high school. The people they looked for were those who related well with young people, but were also experienced. The head of campus emphasised this:

I believe you have to start in mainstream. You have to build your skill, build your craft, and this is something - yeah, so, you ... do have to have good content knowledge, too, because you have got children from such a wide range. So you don't want to get teachers who are struggling with the content in mainstream... Yeah, you do want good teachers. I would hate to see them put inexperienced teachers who weren't coping.

From our observations, they appeared to have found such teachers. We examined some of the work and listened to students in one class as part of this study and were hugely impressed with the quality of work that the students were undertaking. Shona, the English/SOSE /Art teacher at the school, who had a double major and honours in English, had a thorough understanding of effective pedagogies. She taught a lot of integrated units, sought to ensure that there was relevance in the unit and often provided opportunities for students to present their work publicly. At the time of the visit the year 10s were doing a poetry unit within which they had to analyse three poems and create one of their own; they would then represent the theme or mood of their poem in an artwork. Their work was to be used in the school magazine at the end of the year. Shona showed us some of the work associated with this unit:

That is a person's artwork that they did. These were their poems and I would encourage you to read some of them. They do a whole heap of things that they don't realise. Because I am senior English, we get a lot of the senior curriculum without them knowing it. We look at gaps and silences and discourse... we use those terms. They don't realise that they are actually doing it.

The students at Woodlands were involved in work of a high intellectual quality. However, at the same time she saw a place for 'rote learning' in order for the students to obtain some facts. For instance they had been doing a unit on World War 1 in SOSE. She said that they had had to do a lot of rote learning for them to grasp some of the key events and she did some short answer closed questions at the beginning of each lesson to reinforce this learning. Once the students are able to answer some of the factual questions, she says: 'they are so excited... And they start asking each other questions, "Would we change sides?" For the first time in their lives, they know what's going on.' She was also able to link this to current events for them to see the relevance:

...the kids were actually interested in what's happening in Russia and Ukraine. Now, again, it's a perfect thing to actually say, 'Well, here's the history of your Balkan States in World War I. You can see the problem still exists'. So it's linking the current knowledge in that as well.

One of the aspects of Shona's work that she liked was the ability for her to exercise her professionalism by applying her theories of pedagogy to the work she was developing with the students. This was significant in relation to her integrated units of work:

I have got to say, I am very much anti-specialisation. I think it's probably one of the worst things in our society, where kids actually compartmentalise knowledge because it never is. Everything is interconnected.

Importantly, evidenced by the quality of her lessons as well as her attitudes, Shona had also rejected deficit constructions of the students:

... what I keep saying to these kids, 'You are not stupid. You just haven't been taught or you haven't got the skill or you don't know the rule'.... I don't tend to treat the kids down here intellectually any different, while we modify a whole heap of other things.

This rejection of negative constructions of the young people was also reflected in other teachers' comments. Merle, another teacher, for example, wanted to stress to us the significance of many of the students' efforts in just making the effort to attend school:

... some of these kids are coming from fairly horrific backgrounds/families and they are getting themselves to school. That in itself should be reported. We don't recognise the individual backgrounds of these kids. We don't give them any credit for the fact that they even get up and come to school, in their circumstances.

Community links

There has to be a wide community involvement. So if it is just a school thing, it doesn't - it can't grow; it can't seed (School Principal).

The school was very connected into the local community, which was clearly one of its strengths. It had been that way since its foundation. As the head of campus told us:

So it was the community, who, in 1998 started up a little program through School of Distance Ed with volunteers. .. Education Queensland at the time wasn't on board. It was just communities and volunteers.

The community also played a role in maintaining the work of the school both in financial and in-kind terms. She indicated: 'Rotary, the local university, the regional council, the men's support group, all of them contributed in-kind or financially over time. The in-kind is about ceremonies, awards, acknowledgement, belonging to the community.'

The school also sought to provide students with an opportunity to work with the community in supportive ways. For instance, groups of students take turns to work with a church organisation that feeds the homeless. The workplace coordinator organised this program too:

(I) take two/three children; and that is a thing to be seen. Like, if I take Zara, you know, she hardly ever talks - nice girl, but I thought, "Oh, no, how's this going to go?" They step up, like you would not believe... They feed - the food is usually prepared but we have to serve. It's usually the same clients all the time. They have their peanut butter/jam on toast, so we have to make all that; take it out to them and clean up and do all that. It's about an hour and a half. They (the homeless people) come around to window and we have to serve them. We are very welcome to go and sit and talk to the people and our kids do. I have never had a problem, with not one child. Amazing. They just step up like you wouldn't believe.

One of the key features of the school was their mentor system organised through the men's support group (although women also act as mentors). Merle who coordinated the program told us a key aspect of the program was to support students with their 'oracy', which she explained related to their: 'written language, speech, their oral ability, all of those sort of things, because they all interlink with one another, so it's about having really meaningful discussions, instead of just grunting.' The students also appeared to enjoy the experience. One student told us:

It is really good. As well, like, with the people that come in, the mentors, I think that's really good... in year 10, when I had a mentor, it was really good just to sit down and talk for an hour about just life. Especially in big schools, people bottle it in and - like, some people might choose not to talk about it, but it gives you the chance to talk about it.

Work experience was one way that the messages about the school were transmitted into the community. The work experience/career pathways coordinator told us how through placing students in work experience placements strategically they had been able to promote the image of the school. In some cases young people had transferred into apprenticeships through their placements. However, some of the students found it very difficult to communicate with others and had had to be helped to develop these skills. Teacher, Shona, told us about one boy who was an 'IT geek' who had had trouble working with other people. For work experience they had organised him to work with the men's support group where he 'explained to the old blokes how IT works. He's fantastic. He's quite a different boy.'

The links to the local university were also really important. The school had excursions there so that the students could understand what a university had to offer, and so that they could participate in a variety of programs and workshops offered to high school students. Students were also encouraged to see university as an option. The head of campus told us:

In year 12, students can do a tertiary preparation program through our local university and that is funded through - they just provide their tax file number and it's free. They do a bridging course in English and maths and they have to do a pre-test and then they choose what level they go into. If they pass, they then have a meeting with the guidance officer at the uni and they can choose a course. So there is a pathway for uni and they can also have the pathway to TAFE. So that is a really good option.

There was also a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the local university where the university had sponsored positions in their tertiary preparation course. Judy told us that this meant:

Our year Twelves are eligible to do that in semester one and then if they pass they can do a head start program in semester two – off to uni... because I always say to students when they walk in here 'nothing is out of reach, there are possibilities for you to do just about whatever you want it's just finding the right pathway'.

The university also provided computers to the school. At the end of one school year finishing year 12 students were able to keep their school laptop as a result of this scheme.

Connections to the sponsor state high school

All professional learning is shared; all structures are shared (School Principal)

Woodlands Flexischool was different from our other case studies in that it was attached to a high school. There were obvious benefits to this. Being connected to the main school ensures, for instance, that teachers had access to professional development. According to the head of campus:

We link in with a state high school which has a great PD program. So we are on literacy/numeracy, technology, anything that's going and we have a lot of mandatory PD that we get involved in. It's very important that - this is another really important thing I think for EQ to understand - flexi schools still have to be part of a school community. Don't want them to feel isolated.... So, yes, PD is very important; and keeping up with the curriculum. We want to make sure our curriculum here is of equal standard. Don't want anybody to say that we have dumbed down the curriculum or anything like that, because that would lose our integrity.

The principal of the high school also emphasised the importance of a flexi school being connected to a high school, although she felt that the principal of that school would need to be committed to the concept of a flexi school. We spoke of how to create a new flexi school, as they had been receiving inquiries from elsewhere about how to set up one, and she suggested:

I would attach it to a school. I would make sure that the principal of the school was all about the child because then you can be sure that there wouldn't just be, 'Come on with us and we will pass on all these kids that we can't handle'. And the person would actually care for the staff, to involve them in the normal business of the mainstream school.

This sharing was critical to the Flexischool's success. Margaret noted that the high school subsidised the nurse, social worker and guidance officer. The nurse spent one day a week at the Flexischool and two days a week at the mainstream campus, which had a much higher student population. However, whilst being attached to a school was seen as being important, so too was being off the main campus. Judy, head of campus saw being separate from the main school site as being central to the way in which the students engaged with the Flexischool. She told us:

I think they feel more special because it's their little place. ...they are not shoved in a corner. They are in the centre of town where, you know, 'you are pretty cool'; they are out on show. They are not hidden away. They love visitors (laughs). I do think being off-campus, it makes them feel - we make them feel special. We tell them, 'This is a great place to be'. We have our own graduation day. We have our own formal. They love it. We make a big deal of it.

The case study of Woodlands Flexischool provides many lessons for those educators seeking to reengage young people in learning. Notably, its connections to community and to a mainstream high school suggest ways of resourcing such sites both materially and in terms of personnel.

Part D: Final observations – case studies

In this section we have presented a range of alternative schooling sites, in varying locations catering to different clienteles. All sites sought to provide supportive and nurturing environments that responded to the personal needs and academic aspirations of their students as outlined in detail above. We regard each one as an exemplar of 'possibility' thinking – not perfect but dedicated to the pursuit of the best educational practices for their students. 'Success' may be measured in many ways, including the numbers of young people who complete year 12 or who go on to further training or university. Such data are available on the *My School* website. Each of our case studies has had varying 'successes' in this area from year to year. However, what cannot be easily 'measured' is the degree of success they have demonstrated in transforming the personal lives of many young people through providing a safe place for them to land with staff who care enough to listen, mentor and help when the young people have had no one else to turn to. We have heard many stories that echo the sentiments of one young person who simply stated that if it had not been for his alternative school he would have been either in prison or dead. Therefore, we would advocate strongly for the relational model evident in all these sites. However, we also believe that in order to meet all the needs of young people as they are shaped by space and place, it is necessary to determine other structures and supports according to the particularities of each location; for example, consider the centrality of the crèche for the young women at Fernvale Education Centre and the significance of the Bridge Program at Mulhi FLC. In sum, we would argue against notions of a 'one-size/model-fits-all' approach towards meeting the needs of marginalised young people and re/engaging them in education. However, a common framework of practice is evident across the variety of alternative schools studied which can form the basis of key considerations in the creation and evaluation of alternative schools. The dimensions of this '*Engaging students in engaging schools*' framework are:

- *Material supports*: these supports work to 'clear the path' for learning by ensuring that young people have their material needs met (e.g. food, shelter, clothing, legal representation, crèches);

- *School climate*: a positive school climate that is student-centred, flexible, relational and emotionally supportive, is values-centred and community orientated ensures that young people develop an attachment to their school (e.g. mutually respectful relations, a significant adult who can be trusted to develop a supportive relationship with each young person, listening to student voice);
- *Pedagogy and curriculum*: pedagogical practices that are flexible and responsive to the needs of students and curricula that challenge students intellectually and encourage them to see learning as meaningful to them ensure that the schools are neither 'dumping grounds' or 'drop in centres'; and
- *Community links*: schools where the boundaries between the school and the community appear porous work to ensure that schools have grass-roots support and are well connected to local businesses and organisations, and also develop in students a sense of 'giving back' to their community.

These dimensions were shaped according to local contexts and the varying needs of the students at each site. This indicates that diversity is also key to successfully catering to disengaged young people. However, it is clear that each element of this framework functions in complex relationships with the others and that the provision of one in isolation would not be sufficient to address the learning needs of these young people. For example, material supports and positive schooling environments must work together to create opportunities to create meaningful and challenging curricula whilst developing mutually respectful and rewarding connections with local communities.

Section 6: Final observations

Implications

One of the benefits of the interviews with young people in the alternative school sector has been to develop an understanding of their views on the mainstream and to gather data on what happens to young people when they leave the mainstream.⁵ It also became apparent that many of these young people have spent time 'missing' from the education system and that in most cases they knew of other young people who were not in any form of education or employment. However, it is difficult to determine how many young people are in this situation, how long they have been disengaged and what they are doing if not at school. One of the implications that flows from this then is the imperative for educational and welfare workers to ensure that as far as possible young people are not 'lost' from the system and to develop better support systems to 'track' students and facilitate their engagement with schooling.

Identifying young people who have dropped out of education, training or employment completely is thus a difficult process. The manager of a youth connections program informed us that they did work with a lot of young people in this situation, ranging in age from 12 to 20, although the majority of the young people were 15 or older. She informed us that most of these had 'fallen out of mainstream settings', although some had even dropped out of a flexi school setting. The efforts of this organisation were aimed at finding a flexi school setting for these young people as they felt there were more supports for the students there. However, what she was most concerned about

⁵ The Building Young people's Voices documentary video project which YANQ managed in the last year of this research provided an opportunity to validate our finding by hearing from young people directly.

was hearing more and more often that 'schools are putting pressure on students to leave rather than get suspended or excluded.' She said that they were now enrolling students in their programs who had 'agreed to go' from their previous school.

The CEO of a flexible school in a built up coastal area told us that a lot of their students had been out of the school system for a long time. She informed us that these students are 'hard to find' as 'they are the ones that are sitting at home with extreme anxiety, that don't leave the house. So they are already under the radar, the schools don't even know they exist.' She told us that the local youth connections program had been central to finding these students and to getting them 'back into the land of the living.' She went on to say, 'There's at least 1500 kids in this city that are not engaged in school, in the compulsory phase, who aren't doing anything; there's a whole bunch of them.' She told us that the school currently had a waitlist of 200 students who were in this position and that is growing all the time. Thus, across the various education sectors and various models of provision, there is a need to ensure that young people stay connected to schools, as noted by many participant stakeholders.

Keeping young people, especially the State's most vulnerable young people, engaged in education is facilitated when schools and communities work well together. There was a strong suggestion in many of the interviews with the youth sector that schools were often too isolationist and, as above, were not always prepared to accept support from services outside education. This meant that young people could be lost from the system. One manager of a major youth service in a remote area of Queensland was particularly critical of schools in the local area in relation to such isolationism.

Whilst it is the responsibility of governments to resource educational provision adequately, it must be noted that local communities can play a vital role in supporting the work of welfare agencies and educational providers, both mainstream and alternative. The most successful examples of educational re-engagement exemplify this approach. Participants in rural and remote areas of the State also noted the need for greater cultural competency so that staff could connect better with Indigenous communities and initiate systemic improvements that could create incentives for teachers to come to their schools.

If real change in the lives of disengaged young people is to be achieved, there is an imperative for schools to consider how to respond to students' particular circumstances: some young people, for example, may need to find help addressing problems with addictions or substance abuse and, while undergoing such treatments, they may require schooling contexts which have flexibility for attendance and completion of tasks. Consequently, we need to begin a discussion about what schools can do to better accommodate the needs of young people who are attempting to re-engage with education.

Many participants in the youth sector also cited school 'cultures' as an element that needed to change. For example, a youth support coordinator indicated that in her view: 'I think one of the biggest issues is the culture of the teachers.' This was seen as being related to the quality of leadership in a school, as she went on to say: 'You have to have an amazing leader who is going to inspire and educate and support the staff to really engage with the community.' There was also a sense that the current culture was not so supportive of young people who were most likely to disengage from school and that being too punitive was counterproductive 'so that all these naughty kids are no longer in a school, it is just a ticket of freedom for anyone who wants to move them on'.

Some people working in the youth sector were of the view that schools needed to develop a relational based model of working with them (disengaged students) and their families in order to address barriers to learning. This would involve better communications with families and other services in the community. The manager of a major youth organisation in a remote mining town stressed the importance of teachers and others in schools working out ways to come to know their

students and the families from which they come. His advice was: 'Step outside of your comfort zone. Education should not be quarantined within your boundaries as a school.' Within the youth sector there was also a sense that students could be excluded from school far too easily.

The construction of teachers by many youth workers as not always acting in the interests of highly marginalised young people speaks of an apparent lack of trust and positive working relationship between schools and the youth and community sector in some locations. However, as indicated above, enhancing relationships between schools and communities can be key to providing a schooling environment that keeps young people engaged in their schools. Hence, there is a need to find ways to build trust between these sectors in order to ensure that young people do receive the benefits of a high quality education experience.

While the views of the youth workers and many teachers in the alternative school sector stressed the importance of the material and emotional supports that enabled and encouraged young people to attend school, issues of pedagogy and curriculum were clearly important. Ensuring that attending an alternative school is not a dead end for students is a social justice issue that requires young people experiencing pedagogies that challenge them intellectually and being provided with a meaningful curriculum. The evidence collected from the case study schools indicated that where this was happening students, who were also supported through the school's welfare program, were highly engaged in learning as well as developing scenarios for positive life futures.

We are aware that with the growth of the alternative schooling sector in Queensland that there are systemic concerns with how to measure the effectiveness of such schooling. This is especially relevant to DET given the special assistance funding provided to many of these schools. The current criteria used to 'measure' the effectiveness of schools, often seen as problematic for mainstream schools, are clearly not appropriate for the alternative education providers. There is still some work to be done in this area. However, it is important to acknowledge that the lives of many of the young people in such schools have often been so traumatic that simply attending school is an achievement in and of itself. The choice for these young people is often not between attending an alternative school or a mainstream school, but a choice between an alternative school or no school.

As we have noted throughout the report, the young people attending alternative schools often come from highly marginalised backgrounds as a result of poverty and various forms of discrimination. Attending to such social injustices are critical to the provision of a high quality education experience for students in alternative schools (as elsewhere). Within some schools in the study there were very sophisticated understandings of such issues. However, there were in relation to gender, some simplistic understandings that worked with essentialist and normalised constructions of masculinity and femininity. There were also some instances where matters of race and culture were ignored. Within the scope of this report, we have not engaged with the theoretical debates in respect of these issues; rather we have sought to highlight the ways in which various factors of difference may work together or in isolation to marginalise some young people. We identified some of the strategies being employed by some alternative schools to address these issues but also believe that there is the need for the development of greater awareness within the sector in respect of the complexities of race, gender and culture.

In the course of our research we have noted a great diversity of alternative schooling structures – albeit underpinned by some very common principles: these are detailed elsewhere but include, for example, unconditional care and regard for students; differentiated curriculum; practical supports and an individualised but appropriately challenging curriculum facilitated by effective pedagogical practices. This is not suggested as a 'recipe for success' but rather as a snapshot of some of the current practices that appear to be making a difference in the lives of previously disengaged young people.

Recommendations

This report has documented a range of challenges identified in the course of undertaking this research into the educational disengagement of some young people and the need to develop appropriate responses to this problem. In particular we have identified the following elements requiring consideration at a systemic level, at the level of individual schools, mainstream and alternative, in the youth and community sector and for the research community:

Systemic

- Develop a range of strategies to provide access to viable educational options for all young people in Queensland, particularly in respect of high geographical inequity in rural, remote and regional areas of the state;
- Embed more accurate tracking of students, in cooperation with stakeholders (e.g youth workers, teachers, community organisations, juvenile justice) to ensure that young people stay connected to schools and are not 'lost' to the system;
- Raise awareness among mainstream educational providers in respect of the triggers and signs of educational disengagement;
- Review mainstream schooling policies and practices, especially in relation to 'disciplinary absences', that might be barriers to the educational engagement of all young people but particularly to the most marginalised;
- Enhance awareness of theoretical debates addressing the complexities of race, gender and culture;
- Encourage schools to develop positive relationships with the youth and community sector to keep young people engaged in schooling;
- Ensure that initiatives within mainstream schools which provide material and emotional supports to vulnerable young people are adequately funded; and
- Build upon the dimensions outlined in the '*Engaging students in engaging schools*' framework to develop criteria to assess the quality of alternative education provision.

Schools (mainstream and alternative)

- Mainstream schools need to maintain a focus on ensuring that they develop innovative, meaningful and challenging curricula to keep all students, but particularly the most vulnerable, engaged in learning;
- Ensure that quality curricula and effective pedagogical practices underpin alternative educational provision so that such centres become 'learning choices' not 'dumping grounds' or 'drop-in centres' for young people who struggle to stay connected to the mainstream;
- Make strategic use of existing community resources to address educational disadvantage and provide support for alternative and diverse learning pathways, particularly in rural, remote and regional areas of Queensland; and
- Facilitate networks of stakeholders (e.g youth workers, teachers, community organisations, juvenile justice) to support sharing of information and resources.

Youth workers and community organisations

- Youth workers and community organisations, in some locations, need to develop more trusting relationships with schools to keep young people in schooling;
- Initiate dialogue with schools about the needs of marginalised young people in the local community; and
- Continue to advocate for young people within the context of seeing education as important for young people's current and future well-being.

Research community

- Undertake further research into innovative programs that are working in mainstream schools to address the causes of educational disengagement at a school level;
- Undertake longitudinal studies of young people who have been through the alternative school sector; and
- Identify educational outcomes and mechanisms for assessing them so that the quality of alternative education provision can be determined.



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