

Are alternative schools the answer?

By Kitty te Riele

Introduction

There is little doubt that supporting disengaged young people back into education and training is worthwhile, both for the life opportunities it offers these young people and for society (BCA, 2003). Both federal and state governments in Australia have emphasised the need for young people to stay on in school. Over the past two decades, strategies to increase student retention to the end of senior secondary education have been at least partly successful, with many young people (sometimes reluctantly) remaining in school rather than facing insecurity on the labour market (Taylor 2002, Te Riele and Crump 2002). With some states moving to raise the school leaving age, coercion is added for young people to remain in school for an extended time.

In agreement with Taylor (2002, 513), I am critical of the aggressive normalisation of universal Year 12 completion, without denying the negative economic consequences of non-completion for many (but not all) young people. Enabling all young people to engage with post-compulsory education is a worthwhile objective, for economic purposes but also for social and personal well being. To serve marginalised youth, policy needs to change its focus from 'fixing wayward youth' to providing 'non-marginalising' education.

Young people - on the margins

The focus of this paper is on alternative schools at the level of immediate post-

compulsory school education, aimed at young people who – for whatever reason – are unlikely to complete Year 12, or even Year 10, schooling in mainstream settings but who nevertheless would like to achieve such educational credentials.

In Australian policy these young people are usually referred to as 'youth at risk'. This conceptualisation of youth 'at risk' tends to draw attention to what is wrong with these youth, rather than to what may be wrong with schooling or wider social processes. As I have argued elsewhere, the policy discourse around 'youth at risk' thus further contributes to the marginalisation of these young people (Te Riele, 2006a).

Much of the literature on (potential) early school leavers suggests that several factors contribute to cause this 'risk' of non-completion, although the emphasis varies. These factors can be grouped as stemming from the person or individual, the family, the school and/or society (Batten & Russell, 1995). Asking young people themselves about their 'actual lives' and experiences provides some insight in the variety of reasons why they left their previous school. From the point of view of young people who have moved to alternative schools, action (or inaction) on the part of their previous school(s) often played a part (see Te Riele 2004; 2006b).

Schools and teachers may play a direct or intermediary in placing young people at the margins and "activating or enabling the risk of some young people" (Strategic Partners 2001, 16). Without a change in the school, completing senior secondary education



may not necessarily be beneficial. At the same time, schools are able to play a role in reducing marginalisation. As argued by Gewirtz (2003) there has been a growing recognition within the sociology of education that schools not only contribute to reproduction but also have the potential to contribute to more socially just practices. Alternative schools may be part of the solution.

Alternative schools - overview

An often quoted classification of alternative schools, by Raywid (1994) based on USA schools, includes three types of programs: Type I is made up of full time schools and programs for students needing more individualisation, wanting a different curriculum, or wishing to return to school to earn a diploma after dropping out. Type II programs are usually short-term and have a discipline focus, aimed at reforming disruptive students who are usually forced to attend. In the US context these are sometimes referred to as 'last chance' or 'soft jail' programs. Type III programs also tend to be short term, but have a more therapeutic and voluntary rather than disciplinary and coerced approach.

Research in the USA suggests that while completion of Type II and III programs can have short-term benefits for the young person, these benefits rarely last once the young person returns to a school which has not changed itself (Aron and Zweig 2003; Raywid, 1994). In Australia, Holdsworth (2004) agrees that, at best, such programs provide temporary relief. Type I schools and programs, on the other hand, offer more hope. These forms of alternative education have been shown in the US to have more pronounced and long-lasting successful outcomes than short-term

disciplinary or therapeutic programs (Raywid, 1994).

In New South Wales, Type I alternative schools tend to be small and targeted. For example, the Dale Young Mothers' Program in Newcastle has around 25 students and is aimed exclusively at young mothers, aged 14-20. Another example is Key College in Sydney, which is supported through the "Youth off the Streets" organisation. It has about 10 students enrolled at any one time and caters for young people who are homeless or without stable accommodation. Some larger and more established schools exist in the public system, such as Bradfield College and Bankstown Senior College¹. Both operate from Years 10 to 12 and enrol several hundreds of students. Both have a focus on a vocational curriculum (Bradfield more so, due to partnership with TAFE) but there is much diversity among their student populations, in terms of age, socio-cultural background and reasons for moving to the Colleges.

Alternative schools - on the margins?

This paper focuses on Type I schools, since they offer hope for better, less marginalising processes. However, this hope does not mean putting on rose-coloured glasses and ignoring complexities and difficulties. In particular, there are real tensions in these schools around their role and position. They may themselves exist on the margins of the education system, by choice or through external force. On the other hand, they can be central to contributions to broader school reform.

¹ Access programs in TAFE may also operate as very well-established Type I programs. Due to the specific nature of TAFE they are not considered as part of this paper.



On the margins through external force

Although some schools choose to remain small, if they do not have the back-up of both funding and effort from a larger organisation, marginalisation can be imposed through lack of stability (Strategic Partners, 2001, 93):

Without systemic change, effective practice that serves marginalised young people will mostly remain isolated, and eventually disappear when the personal energy or funding runs out.

For example, some programs rely heavily on funding under the federal governments' Partnership Outreach Education Model Pilots (POEMs) program. The usual tendering process for those kinds of funding means that when a different group is awarded funding, schools and other organisations have to re-establish a connection, while rapport and expertise are lost.

A major cause for concern of teachers in alternative public schools is that the State department formula for allocating support services and funding does not suit their atypical structure and student population. For example teachers in one school suggested that, given the needs of their students, they needed more support services than other schools but often received less because they fell outside the norm:

For us to exist and provide that service for folks in the future we need to get more support or find a niche within our own Department that says 'yes we value this kind of thing'. Instead of always finding ourselves just sitting outside the norm [...] There is no extra provision for how much extra time dealing with folks like this can involve.

Another way in which marginalisation can be imposed on alternative schools is through negative community perceptions. A student at a small alternative school explains the, in his view unfair, poor reputation of the school:

Just everyone's perception of it at the moment is wrong. They look at it as being a school for those who can't handle school which I guess in a way it is but people here are doing what they want to do, they're doing their work.

Other schools can sometimes use alternative schools as a convenient repository for students they cannot deal with themselves. Although the following quote refers to TAFE, the same can apply to alternative schools: "Students are often encouraged/sent to TAFE when they become problems at the high schools" (TAFE staff meeting, cited in NSW DET, 2005, 92). The focus on academic reputation in some schools may also contribute to low-achieving students literally being pushed out: "I was slower than everyone else. They said I was better to leave" (student in Holden and Dwyer 1992, 13). As a result alternative schools and TAFE programs can be perceived not so much as a 'second chance' but as 'second best': schools on the margins for students on the margins.

On the margins by choice

Alternative schools may actively choose to remain small and marginal because they see this as a strength. For example, Key College offers individual learning programs leading to Year 10 and Year 12 certificates and provides a school environment that is "considerably different to that of a mainstream high school" (Youth off the Streets, 2005,



n.p.). Moreover, a specific focus or target group of students can create a peer support structure, since all students share the experience of, for example, being homeless or being a young mother. Larger numbers of students as well as more variety may undermine the ability of an alternative school to provide the individualisation, personal approach and curricular focus that make them successful.

The educational philosophy of the founder and/or champion of a school may also lead to a self-imposed, if not chosen, marginalisation. Blacktown Youth College is a small non-government school, described on its website as “a semi-democratic school with a negotiated curriculum” (Blacktown Youth College, 2005, n.p.). The school philosophy opposes the use of exams and therefore does not use the regular Year 10 School Certificate. Instead, they offer Year 10 through the ‘Life Skills’ School Certificate, which was originally developed for intellectually disabled students in New South Wales. Although none of the Blacktown Youth College have intellectual disabilities, their School Certificate may not be perceived by employers and further education providers as having the same value as a regular Year 10 qualification. On the other hand, it is possible that the experience of Blacktown Youth College will contribute to broader reforms through challenging the use of standardised, state-wide exams in Year 10.

Contributing to reform

Returning to thinking of these alternative schools in hopeful terms, they can offer productive possibilities for social and educational change. These schools can

act as incubators of change and as showcases of innovation. Alternative schools may be better able to try out different approaches, due to their smaller size and acceptance of their different purpose by students, teachers, parents and even Board of Studies inspectors. Moreover, staff in these schools have a willingness to change default schooling practices and find out what works best for their students:

I see students come in here who have made a choice to come here because it is different, or because they are different. I see that the purpose of the College is to meet their needs, what ever they may be. To me that is not offering them what they have had before. If they haven't succeeded at what we call a normal sort of school then we wouldn't want to offer them the same again.

Importantly, these type of successful alternative programs have the potential to inform change in mainstream schooling. As Raywid (1994) argues, marginalised students are quite similar to the rest of the student population. Dwyer (1996) estimated 25 per cent of students in senior high school would prefer to leave if they could. As Holdsworth (2004, 4) described, these young people “sit in classrooms, passively cooperating, even responding positively, but waiting for the bell”. Although they do not actively rebel against school, it does not serve them well.

Thus, distinguishing a minority of ‘at risk youth’ is likely to misrepresent the lives of most young people. The focus on identifying groups of young people who are ‘at risk’ sets up a “false distinction” (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001, 154) between the mainstream and a ‘problematic’ minority, which denies the possibility of common concerns across all or most youth, and of problems in the



mainstream and strengths in the minority.

As Raywid (1994, 27) proposes, the main difference is that marginalised students “are just more dependent on a good education”. The reforms that make schooling work better for marginalised students in alternative programs can improve schooling for most students in regular schools as well. This does not mean that all schools should become like Type I alternative programs. Rather, these kind of alternative schools emphasise the need to replace uniformity with diversity, by building on the unique interests, capacities and experiences of the students the school serves.

To illustrate: an alternative school in regional New South Wales has a student population dominated by students from low socio-economic backgrounds, from the ‘wrong side of the tracks’ and out of the juvenile justice system. The school has chosen to specialise in providing high quality vocational education and work experience together with a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy. Despite initial community concern about the ‘bad kids’ in the school, they are now establishing a reputation for innovative approaches to vocational education. Five years after starting up, they are beginning to be the school of choice (rather than the last resort) for some students. Moreover, they have established themselves as the school of choice for many businesses in town, both for work experience placements and for offers of traineeships and apprenticeships to graduates.

Too often alternative programs are seen as marginal to mainstream schooling, which limits the extent to which they can influence more traditional schools (Spierings, 2003). The questions posed by Holdsworth (2004, 12) are crucial:

“Are we ready to recognise that the educational learnings from these ‘alternatives’ need to ‘come in from the cold’? Are we ready to shift these practices from the margins to the centre of what we do?”.

Distinguishing between alternative and mainstream schools already is a little artificial – not unlike the false distinction between ‘at risk’ and ‘normal’ youth. After all, many mainstream schools have innovative programs while alternative schools have to function within the same frameworks set by the NSW Board of Studies (or other State authority) as other schools. The subtitle of the NSW DET (2005) ‘Future Directions’ report: “One size doesn’t fit all” gives some hope that diversity can be embraced system-wide and alternative schools perceived (and supported) not so much as marginal and second-best, but as innovative and first-class.

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About the Author

Kitty te Riele is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at UTS. Her research is concerned with educational policy and practice for marginalised young people. Kitty is interested in the ways schools can play a role both in marginalising and in (re-)engaging young people. Currently, she is particularly interested in developing a better conceptual understanding of educational institutions that operate on the fringes of the mainstream secondary school system ('alternative schools') and the ways in which they can make a positive difference for marginalised young people.

