

Engaging programs: How are Australian schools responding to low student retention?

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David Zyngier recently completed the development of the ruMAD? Program (<http://www.rumad.org.au> - Kids Making a Difference in the Community) – for the Education Foundation of Victoria. He was an Education Consultant and former school principal currently undertaking his PhD in education at Monash University where he lectures in the Faculty of Education. The area of his research is "How School Connectedness can improve student engagement and student outcomes, particularly for at risk students." He is also part a of team investigating the effectiveness of "Non Systemic and Non Traditional Programs" in addressing student disengagement with learning for the Local Learning and Employment Network.

Trevor Gale has investigated students' engagement with education for more than ten years. His research program has been pursued in formal academic research and considerable international publication as well as through consultancies and professional engagement across various education sectors. Professor Gale's research has developed along two main lines, which have been progressed through a series of projects on higher education and schooling.

These studies have been generally concerned with (1) policy production, including policy making strategies and issues of participation in the policy making process; and (2) social justice issues, including how these are evident in school curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and organisational structures. These two strands have also brought together understandings at both macro and micro levels of education and society more broadly. Trevor has recently made significant contributions to 'students at educational risk' policy at local school levels, particularly the articulation of what these 'risks' involve in contexts of practice, and what 'success' in schooling means from the perspectives of students, parents and teachers.

Abstract:

Currently, there is significant interest and concern within Australian schooling in relation to low student attendance, retention and achievement. Many schools are responding to these issues by developing and implementing alternative programs and/or utilising or modifying programs developed elsewhere, adapting them to their own local understandings of their students' specific needs. This paper reports research focused on the programs employed by twelve such schools, clustered on the edge of a major city and experiencing comparatively high rates of student disengagement. The intent of this research was to examine how schools understand the 'problem' of student disengagement and its potential 'resolution' and to compare this with students' own understandings of these issues, particularly for students 'at risk'. Data collected in the research includes surveys and interviews with teachers and students involved in programs that offered alternatives to the schools' traditional curricula. Preliminary analysis of the data indicates that more than 50% of these programs were concerned with helping students to 'fit in' with school expectations, focusing on student 'well-being', behaviour modification and life skills. And, in almost 70% of programs, student entry / enrolment was determined by teachers. In examining these and other data, we argue that program 'success' needs to take account of students own reasons for why they are disengaged from schooling and what changes schools and teachers themselves might need to consider, including the interests and involvement of students in decision-making processes and the inclusion of intellectually challenging material for students 'at educational risk'.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st Century, there is significant interest and concern – within Victoria as well as in other Australian states – with student retention, participation and achievement rates in post compulsory schooling. By way of response, governments and schools have developed many programs to improve students' engagement with learning. In our view, the most successful of these programs engage learners with the 'real' world; that is, the present and future world that is meaningful for students.

This research presents the findings of research, commissioned by the Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN), into 'non-systemic and non-traditional' school based programs in the area. By *non-traditional* (or alternative) we mean learning experiences that are not necessarily linked to traditional school curricula, whereas by *non-systemic* (or school-specific) we mean learning experiences that are not mandated by a schooling system (for example, by DE&T) but have been devised, adapted and/or adopted by the school itself.

Most of the programs investigated in this research aimed to improve educational outcomes for all students but in particular those identified as 'at-risk of disengagement' from schooling, and education and training more broadly.

These aims reflect the current Victorian Minister of Education's commitment to:

'... develop[ing] innovative programs ... [that] will drive the required systemic changes that will allow schools to improve retention rates, lift achievement levels, and actively engage all students in education. Targeted programs are being funded to provide the resources necessary to make a real difference to young people's lives so that they will have a much better chance for a successful future. ... A feature of this new program for students in Years 7 to 10 will be more 'face-to-face' contact and educational mentoring with students. The program is aimed at boosting literacy and numeracy skills, cutting down on absenteeism rates and keeping all Victorian students engaged and stimulated at school.' (*Access, Innovation and Excellence: State Budget 2002* <http://www.det.vic.gov.au/det/resources/pdfs/budget2002et.pdf>)

In commissioning this research, the LLEN was of the view that an analysis of these programs operating in the region would prove useful to local schools in identifying the features of programs that promote student attendance, retention and achievement.

Specifically, the research sought to identify:

- What programs were operating? For whom?
- What students and teachers do in these programs?
- How the programs can be characterised?
- What were the intended program and student outcomes? and
- How the programs contribute to an understanding of 'good practice' in addressing student and youth engagement and disengagement?

In addressing these questions, the research was informed by the following data sources:

- A review of the academic and research literature with respect to *programs* designed for 'at-risk' students;
- 26 surveys completed by the area's 12 state secondary schools (mid 2002);
- Semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers from 7 of the 12 respondent schools (November 2002 to April 2003); and
- Structured interviews with 3 focus groups (5 to 6 students in each group) of students involved in programs operating in 3 of the respondent schools (November 2003)

Ethical approval for the research was sought and obtained from the University's Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans.

The remainder of the paper is in four sections: (i) an environmental scan (ii) a review of the academic and research literature; (iii) a detailed account and analysis of the data collected; and (iv) conclusions and recommendations arising from the research.

Environmental Scan ¹

The schools are located in southeast bayside region of Melbourne. The area's population has a markedly different age structure than that of Melbourne, with proportionately more youth and retirees. The proportion of the population with lower than average individual income is 6% higher than Melbourne. The percentage of single-parent families is also considerably higher than Melbourne.

Compared with metropolitan averages, the population of the area is characterised by:

- A considerably low level of people with tertiary education qualifications compared to the Melbourne metropolitan figure (14.8 per cent compared to 19.4 per cent) in 1996.
- A significant percentage of the population in areas with no qualifications.
- An elevated proportion of low-income earners (51% of the population, aged 15 years and over, earning less than \$300 per week, compared to the metropolitan Melbourne figure of 46%).
- Elevated unemployment levels in pockets compared to both municipal averages as well as that of Melbourne.
- Library membership at 33 per cent of the population, significantly lower than the 51 per cent for Melbourne

Youth involvement in education, training and employment

Youth (15-19years) activities were characterized by 28.7% in employment and 27.9% in secondary schooling and 20.7% participation in TAFE. 12.6% of youth were not engaged in any form of education, training or employment while 10.1% were enrolled in university. Both of these last two are of concern: the first (no study, no work), because it is worryingly high compared with metropolitan Melbourne and National figures, particularly the 6.6% of youth about whom little else is known; the second (university enrolment), because it is worryingly low compared with the Victorian State average university enrolment of approximately 35% for this age group.

This low enrolment of youth in university is of particular concern against a backdrop of these students' high General Achievement Test (GAT) results (Teese, R. 2002) and yet low application rates to university. Teese notes that the region '... has the highest rate [close to 45%] of "non-application" amongst male school completers in metropolitan Melbourne.' In other words, 'the comparatively low [school] retention rates [discussed below] do not lead to a greater concentration on university.' '[E]very third teenager completing school looks elsewhere and does not seek to build directly on their VCE through tertiary education' (Teese, 2002, p. 43).

The proportion of this population group among university students is declining in Australia (from 14.7% in 1991 to 14.5% in 2002) from an already below average representation: people from a low socio-economic background constitute 25% of the total Australian population. That is, people from low socio-economic backgrounds have roughly half the likelihood of going to university than those from middle and high socio-economic backgrounds. Indigenous people, often from low socio-economic backgrounds, are also under-represented among Australian university students. (Centre for the Study of Higher Education 2002; DEST 2003)

Most of the government secondary schools have instituted programs, which – among other things – are intended to address student retention. The needs of these youth require differentiation in order to promote their inclusion in mainstream activities; particularly homeless youth, some Indigenous youth, youth with disabilities, refugee youth and single parents. Frequently, these are the youth who leave school early and display ongoing marginal attachment to work, further education and training, skills development and community participation. Information about the destinations of early school leavers varies. For example, indicative destinations data suggests that early school leavers from local government secondary schools proceeding to unknown destinations have risen from 32% in 2001 to 40.4% in 2002.

¹ The following section is extracted and abridged from the published study by Gale, T & Murphy, E 2003, *Environmental Scan 2002 Revision*, Centre for Work and Learning Studies (CWALS) and FMP Local Learning Employment Network (LLEN). We acknowledge its importance and scholarship.

Education participation and attainment

In 2002, there were 43,305 students enrolled in all the region's secondary schools, an increase of 4.9% from 2000. Around three-quarters (75.7% in 2000, 75.2% in 2002) of these students are enrolled in government secondary schools. Projected enrolments in 2003 for all Victorian secondary schools are: 220,400 (government), 81,500 (catholic) and 63,900 (independent). On this basis, these secondary students comprise around 12% of the total Victorian secondary student population and around 15% of the Victorian government schools student population. That is, the non-government secondary student population in this region is below the Victorian average. While Indigenous youth represent a very small percentage (approximately 0.0007%) of the total region's youth population, issues about their participation in education and training are still a concern. For example, 21.4% of indigenous 15 to 17 year-olds are not attending any form of education or training. Neither was 64.3% of indigenous 18 and 19 year olds or 66.3% of indigenous 20 to 24 year-olds. Reasons for their non-participation might have similarities with other local youth, albeit more acutely felt, and/or there might be other socio-cultural reasons for this non-participation.

Early School Leaving

In 2000, the Ministerial Review of Education and Training Pathways Report (Kirby Report) indicated that this region in 1998 had the highest rate of early school leaving in the Metropolitan area. In 1998, the rate of early school leaving in this region was between 21-30% for girls, and over 36% for boys. (Ministerial Review, p.51).

Apparent retention rates vary considerably between government schools in the area. For all schools, apparent retention is higher between Years 7 to 10 than between Years 7 to 12, with retention falling away most noticeably in Year 11 but also in Year 12. The apparent retention rate of Year 10-12 students across all local government schools rose from 68.7% in 2001 to 69.5% in 2002; a rise of 1.2%. This was considerably lower than the 10.2% rise in the State-wide Year 10-12 apparent retention rate (for both government and non-government schools) from 78.4% in 2001 to 86.4% in 2002. While the basis for these figures are not exactly comparable – the local figures relate exclusively to government schools while the state-wide figures also include non-government schools – the lower than average non-government school sector in the region increases their comparative usefulness for indicative purposes, with caution.

From the beginning of the 1998 to 2001 period apparent retention rates for the eleven government secondary schools in the area increased in most categories – in some cases, illustrating a turn around from an initial decline. However, apparent retention rates for Year 10 to Year 11 seem to have moved in opposite directions, first rising and then declining overall.

In a recent analysis of early school leaving data – particularly focused on north-west Melbourne and on this region – Teese suggested that school-related reasons for leaving school are more concerning than work-related ones and, more generally, 'not all early [school] leaving is bad' (2002, p. 5). With regard to school-related motives, Teese suggests that student 'improvements in achievement are crucial for reducing early leaving' (2002, p. 31) from school, given that 'attitudes towards school weaken as reported learning difficulties become greater' (2002, p. 29).

In 1999, The Report Keeping Kids at School similarly claimed that 'schools with high levels of absence tend to achieve lower academic results' (DET, 1999, p. 6). In Victorian secondary schools, including the Southern Metropolitan Region in which schools are located, absenteeism peaks in Year 9 and declines thereafter. If Teese's assessment above has currency here, school-related motives for absenteeism would seem to diminish as students progress through school. Unlike some regions in Victoria where both low achievement and early school leaving are found, Teese (2002) suggests that early school leaving in this region is not necessarily associated with low levels of scholastic achievement.

A Literature Review of Programs for 'At-Risk' Students

The focus of this review is on *programs* organised by schools for students who are at risk of not completing the non-compulsory years of schooling and/or who are at risk of low academic achievement. It is inevitable that such a review would also consider the nature of these risks. However, the clear emphasis in this review is on the responses of education institutions to these risks.

In conducting this review of the academic and research literature, a number of major reports and literature reviews were consulted². This review briefly summarises these reviews and then discusses how their findings contribute to our understanding of programs designed to assist 'at-risk' students. The section concludes with reference to the *Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study* (QSRLS) findings in relation to pedagogies and curriculum that 'work' for marginalised students (Lingard et al. 2001).

Expectations of schools and students

Recent government targets in Australia aimed at increasing student participation (hanging out), retention (hanging on) and achievement (hanging in) have meant that more young people are staying on in schools into the post-compulsory years. Much of this retention is the result of 'learning' programs developed by schools for 'at-risk' students, although these often have a different 'feel' to traditional remedial classes. Local schools are being innovative and inventive in their provision of services and programs for young people (Kirby 2000, p. 8).

Nevertheless, these programs appear in a context of continuing barriers to students' improved education outcomes (The Allen Consulting Group 2003, p. 4). Some even suggest that the current emphasis on increasing student retention has meant that students who require more assistance miss out in favour of those already likely to be successful (Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001b, p. 23). As Kirby (2000, p. 7) puts it, many young people continue to 'fall through the cracks'. Indeed, the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (DSF 2002) suggests that at least 15% of 15-24 year olds are not in any work or in any education. OECD figures estimate somewhere between 15-20% of young people leave school without a 'worthwhile' qualification and that 15-30% are classed as 'at-risk' of failure in school. According to these figures, a total of 30%-50% are at educational risk (Budge 2000)!

Further support for this view can be found in a recent OECD (2002) report, which suggests that among OECD countries Australia has one of the largest gaps (up to 4 years of schooling) between the highest and lowest achievers in the same age group. Other reports on the education of Australian young people (Connors 2000; Kirby 2000) also identify the persistent inequality in students' educational outcomes and opportunities, in particular for the marginalised and most vulnerable.

Faced with these poor outcomes and diminished opportunities, government policies and reports often place expectations on schools to be the responsible agents for addressing the education needs of disadvantaged youth. For example, the *Public Education: The Next Generation* Report acknowledges that while schools cannot be expected to 'do it all themselves', they can and should take explicit responsibility for ensuring that students remain engaged in education (Connors 2000, p. 9 - 11).

Relocating risk

This is quite a different positioning for schools and students than what has prevailed in the past. There is a strong tradition in the literature that attributes reasons for student 'failure' to the deficits and/or disadvantages of students themselves.³ For example, the deficit literature often attributes students' poor academic achievement to their lack of motivation. Much of this research comes from the USA, is psychological in orientation and rarely cognisant of cultural differences and other broad contextual matters. However, some researchers operating within these deficit and disadvantage paradigms acknowledge that there is no single factor associated with education success or failure. As they put it, even countries that appear to be

² For a full list of the reports see Appendix 3.

³ See Gale & Densmore (2000) for an overview of these deficit and disadvantage accounts.

'motivating their children academically' are well aware that they have 'troubles of their own' (Budge 2000, p. 22).

The diversity of students' attributes is almost cliché in the literature. Apparently, there is no dominant typification of an early school leaver (DETYA 2001, p. 15) and we are warned about the dangers of public discourses that label schools as welfare and 'at-risk' specialists. On the latter, Teese et al. (2003) draw attention to the socio-geography of disadvantage – informed by Connell's (1993) geography of poverty – while Thomson (2002) has described what she calls the 'rustbelt schools' and the 'at-risk industry'.

These researchers who reject a deficit and blame-the-victim approach point specifically to school related issues of organisation, curriculum and 'climate' as significant factors. In brief, research on students' 'at-riskness' tends to identify three main issues for education and training institutions:

1. non-stimulating environments;
2. the lack of clear relationships with the wider community leading to an absence of support and referrals; and
3. negative teacher-student relationships

It would seem from the literature that schools have not always taken up the challenge to address these issues. Instead, they typically return to individualised and de-contextualised understandings of students' 'problems'. In response to these perceived needs of young people 'at-risk', school programs have either been portrayed as preventive – as part of an early intervention strategy (DETYA 2001) – or ameliorative (remedial). The OECD (1986b) reports that the most common approach by schools is to create or offer remediation rather than preventative programs for students 'at-risk' so that the 'problem' of risk is rarely addressed adequately.

Hence, Dwyer et al (1998) suggest that there are 3 sorts of early school leavers: (i) those that elect out, (ii) those that drift out and (iii) those who are driven out. With regard to the first, Teese (2003) notes that not all early-school-leaving should be seen as a negative and that for some young people early school departure is a positive and affirming decision.

What seems to work

Despite these assessments, much of the literature suggests that positive results can be achieved for 'at-risk' youth with concurrent activity in the school and in response to policy, program and funding decisions at a system level (DETYA 2001). Further, the literature advocates program activities directed at engaging students in meaningful learning. Indeed, student engagement is often cited as crucial for the success of these programs, although 'engagement' is rarely defined and if at all it is usually portrayed as the opposite of alienation or dis-engagement (Cummings, 1996). Related to this, what literature there is on this topic suggests that the most critical factor in quality learning is quality teaching and that a necessary component of this is providing students with the time to learn. In Bourdieu's (1997) terms, the surest thing we can say about the accumulation of cultural capital is that it occurs over time in the company of the bearers of cultural capital.

Clearly, this has implications for programs that remove students from mainstream activities, thereby removing them from important sources of knowledge (i.e. their peers) and which also tend to provide these students with alternative curricula that is not as highly valued by the education system. There is no conclusive evidence in the literature that students have improved achievement or altered patterns of learning through the development or implementation of remediation type programs (Mortimore & Mortimore 1999, p. 128). In the end, the advantaged have always gained more from intervention initiatives than the disadvantaged, resulting in the students 'at-risk' falling further behind their peers and making it even harder to alter the pattern of inequality of outcomes. Hence, Willis (1999) and Thomson (2002) warn of the danger that programs deemed 'appropriate' for working class children will be developed by middle class teachers that will only serve to further protect the privilege of the middle class students.

By contrast, the recent QSRLS research (Lingard et al. 2001) suggests that all students are capable of quality outcomes in the context of a sustained and disciplined inquiry focused on

powerful, important ideas and concepts that are connected to students' experiences and the world in which they live (Lingard et al. 2001, vol. 1, p. xi).

The key finding of the QSRLS should come as no surprise: the higher the level of intellectual demand expected of students by teachers, the greater the improved productive performance and, hence, improved student outcomes. The QSRLS research also found that it was that students most 'at-risk' of failure, from socially, culturally and economically disadvantaged conditions who were the least likely to be exposed to intellectually challenging and relevant material.

Relevant to this research into non-systemic and non-traditional school programs, the QSRLS suggests that 'structural restraints work against [providing students with challenging material] in ways which lead to cynicism and often to despair amongst teachers. It is the creation of cultures of despair which has the effect of inhibiting productive changes within schools.' (Lingard, B. et al. 2001b, p. 136). These structural restraints are systemic ones such as curriculum and assessment policies and designs (eg. VCE requirements, the CSF, etc).

As noted above, schools are acknowledged in the literature as having a 'critical role' in both prevention and early intervention. School culture is a key variable but there are also many outside factors and therefore successful programs will extend beyond the school but 'how far is still the subject of debate' (DETYA 2001, p. 25). Schools have become the main sites of early identification, tracking and unthreatening first point of contact for 'at-risk' students. But one of the problems with actually monitoring and evaluating successful intervention projects and programs is that they often involve real world situations and are not closed systems or laboratory type experiments (Mortimore & Mortimore 1999, p. 114).

The research by Brown et al (2001) confirms that 'at-risk' students also clearly understand that the nature of the school culture and ethos is critical to their attachment to school, in both a positive and negative sense. Brown et al. (2001, p. 126) found that there are 'substantial pressures and barriers within schools that act to restrict or prevent the development of such relationships.' In particular, these pressures can be found in the practices and institutions that serve to informally exclude 'at-risk' students from school (Angwin et al. 2001).

Proposals to 'fix' education systems by 'bits and pieces' is rejected by DETYA as this 'will not deliver long term sustainable change' (DETYA 2001). This kind of change requires not just a 'proliferation of new practices ... but also whole of school change ... backed up and mandated by systemic guidelines, policies and appropriate resource allocations' (DETYA 2001, p. 26). In this mix, teachers can 'tip the balance' especially for marginalised students (Lingard et al. 2001). Such a conception of whole school development is one in which 'an understanding of disadvantage informs discussion and decisions about all aspects of school organisation' (Johnston & White, 1991, p. 116).

Even predating Lingard et al. (2001), the literature suggests that in order to improve the success and outcomes of all, but in particular 'at-risk' youth, school programs must be learner centred and focussed on individual needs, interests and concerns, emphasising self direction and constructive learning that include purpose, empowerment rigour and success (Barratt 1997). Similarly, Cumming's (1996) seminal work states that school curriculum must be relevant, negotiated, integrated and connected, linking personal and social concerns.

In developing programs, schools may consider targeting work experience towards young people most 'at-risk' to ensure that negotiated, purposeful and supported work placements are available where they will be of most benefit. Cumming (1997) identifies community based learning (CBL) as part of the community-school partnership essential to improve student learning and enhance community development to re-engage young people with education (Dwyer 1998:14). To be effective, CBL must integrate and connect to academic studies, be part of the real life in the community, enhance school knowledge, and use collaborative learning (DETYA 2001, p. 66).

What doesn't seem to work

Unfortunately, this is not the experience of all students in school. While some 'hang in' at school, sometimes despite what the school offers them, many others 'drift out' and some almost seem to be 'driven out'.

'Dropping out is the culmination of a process of disengagement that often begins in the [youngest] class' (Budge 2000, p. 29). While students expect to learn if their teachers expect them to learn' (Budge 2000, p. 34):

'There is a disconnection between what is required of young people to live in the world today and the education they receive. There is also a disconnection between what educationalists and teachers believe they are teaching young people and what young people believe they are learning.' (Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001b, p. 22)

Most school-based initiatives are site specific and reflect specifically targeted interventions that try to fix up bits of the broken pieces to stop students 'falling through the cracks' (Kirby, 2000) And most programs are *supplemental* rather than *fundamental* or *mainstream*, directed at specific 'sub-populations' and remain isolated alternatives to the mainstream. (DETYA 2001, pp. 93-4). This is in contrast to successful school based initiatives, which have involved building relationships with the wider community. 'Sustainable change can only be achieved where there is clear ownership at the local community provider level which supports the structural change' while innovative models are likely to link significantly with related and often parallel programs in the community bringing together different sectors (DETYA 2001, pp. 95-7).

The translation of these research results into improved outcomes has been generally poor – with serious implications for issues of transportability, transferability and replicability. While there is a 'proliferation of innovative activities for 'at-risk' young people [that] represents a groundswell of commitment ...[a] lot of money can be spent in pursuit of limited benefits without some commitment to systemic change. ... Without system change, effective practice that serves marginalised or 'at-risk' young people will either remain localised, and/or dissipate as resources shrink and creative energy is exhausted. (DETYA 2001, p. 102)

How schools address the problems of 'at-risk' students can also seem to drive students out of school. As Wright et al. (2000) note, marginalised students are stereotyped as 'deviant' (a pathological view of 'at-riskness') and seen as capable of 'contaminating' the school culture making parents think twice before sending their children to the local school. This view produces programs designed to 'reinforce structures that have broken down' (Wright et al., 2000, p. 35) rather than question the structures themselves.

The literature also reveals that there are significant numbers of 'at-risk' students being suspended or excluded or developing 'chronic' absenteeism (truanting) and that often school practices do not encourage the retention of these 'problem' students. Schools too often respond with practices that lead inexorably to students opting out, to informal exclusion by maintaining environments that do not engage students, insisting on curriculum content that is too difficult or irrelevant, alienating students through poor teacher-student relations or failure to provide alternative learning opportunities (Young 2000, p. 150). Dwyer et al. (1998) and Apte (2001) are more forceful in their analysis, suggesting that such students are being 'driven out' from school.

Good programs - what do they look like?

In summary, then, the research acknowledges that schools play a critical role for 'at-risk' youth, but much of this work appears to be fragmented with individualistic approaches that often can be ineffective at best and at worst detrimental. Achieving improved participation, retention and achievement levels increasingly necessitates the need to deal with students from lower socio-economic status, rural areas and those who have little engagement with schools.

This review of the literature⁴ highlighted at least 178 differently named characteristics of good practice. We suggest that there is some agreement within the research on the following:

1. Successful programs are both mainstream and relevant, reflecting real world problems. They do not focus on remediation or basic skills, nor are they based on withdrawal or separate programs for the few chosen to participate.

⁴ See Appendix 1 for details

2. Successful programs are socially supportive, intellectually challenging and respond to student needs both current and in the long term.
3. The selection and training of the participating teachers is crucial, while it can be inferred that leadership 'from above' is less vital
4. Successful programs actively involve and connect to the students' world and the community.

Data Analysis

The "at-risk" issue for many schools in this study is highlighted by the disproportionately large enrolments of students "at-risk" into individual schools - a fact not yet recognised or acknowledged by policy makers and central administrators. The concentration of students "at-risk" in particular schools *at the bottom of the pecking order* can create a culture of disadvantage. Even research into students "at-risk" at such schools can cause a flight to 'more balanced school populations.' (Mortimore & Mortimore 1999, p. 131) Publication of comparative academic and aspirational results can only accentuate this *flight* of cultural capital. As 'more and more people desire access to fewer and fewer schools' the issue of social and cultural capital is further accentuated (Teese, 2003). It is 'impossible to make a fair judgement of what [a school is doing] without taking into account the nature of its student intake. ... It is foolish to pretend that the social background of the students makes no difference' (Mortimore & Mortimore 1999, p. 131).

This section describes and analyses the data collected in the research and is organised in keeping with the three different data sets: (i) school surveys; (ii) teacher interviews; and (iii) student focus groups. The teacher and student interviews are each analysed in three ways: (i) in terms of how the 'problem' is *named* and *framed*; (ii) the *selection* and *ordering* of program activities – what programs should deliver for teachers and students; and (iii) the possibilities and opportunities available to students.

What schools said about the programs

Surveys were distributed to all 18 secondary schools (including private schools) in the area. 12 schools (all government schools) elected to respond to the survey. The survey requested information from schools about their non-systemic and non-traditional programs. It has been difficult to quantify exactly the number of these programs operating in schools that focus on:

- student attendance, retention, and achievement,
- addressing student engagement or disengagement with learning, and
- young people 'at risk' of not completing their education.

This is because schools have not always clearly articulated the specific purposes of some programs and how they address the above issues. Alternatively, some teachers were reluctant to suggest that what they were doing was 'relevant' to these interests. To date, 45 different school programs have been identified.

The following categories are provided to assist understanding of the intended contributions to students of the above non-traditional and non-systemic programs currently offered by the secondary schools in this study. Several programs have more than one intention and this is taken into account in the analysis below.

The categories are distinguishable by their Student Focus. These have been discerned from what schools have said or written about the core aims and activities of each program. A short description also accompanies each category / student focus.

TABLE 1 PROGRAM CATEGORIES AND CHARACTERISTICS

Student Focus (categories)	Program Intentions (characteristics)
<i>Program or Curriculum Focus</i>	To improve students' essential / basic skills, to facilitate continued study at school.
<i>Student Well-being</i>	To develop students' self-confidence, self-esteem and related social skills, and improve the mental and physical health of students, to facilitate continued study at school.
<i>Behaviour Modification</i>	To deal with / attempt to modify students' inappropriate social

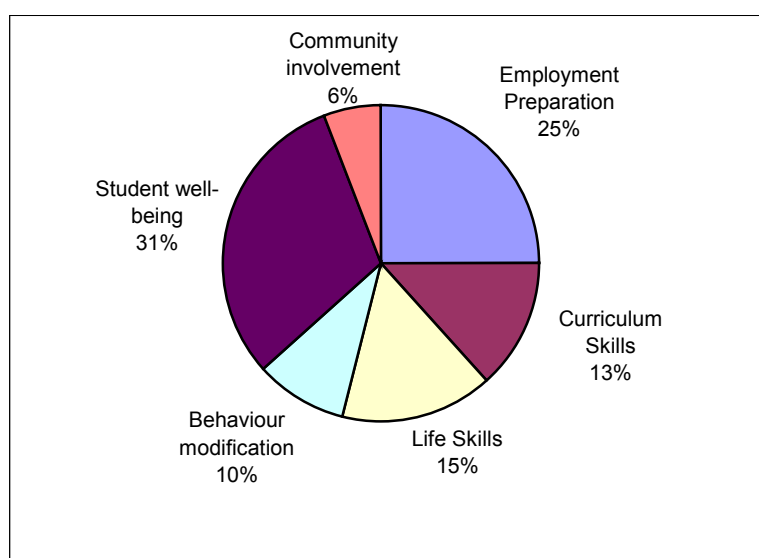
	behaviours (as defined by the school) that hinder the development of a positive learning environment and individual academic progress, in order to facilitate students' continued study at school.
<i>Community Involvement</i>	To link students to and/or work with and in the community, but does not involve work experience, in order to facilitate continued study at school.
<i>Life or Practical skills</i>	To develop in students the essential skills for productive adult participation in society, as preparation for leaving school.
<i>Employment Preparation</i>	To provide counselling, discussion and research to assist students find appropriate work or vocational training, in preparation for leaving school.

While the research is still in progress, there are a number of issues of current interest, particularly with respect to program foci and the extent to which students can choose to participate in these programs. The graphs are useful in visually illustrating some of the more important aspects of this data.

Over 40% of programs focus on helping students “fit in” with the current pattern of schooling, by making the school experience more tolerable for them (making students resilient) through either a student well-being and/or behaviour modification focus.

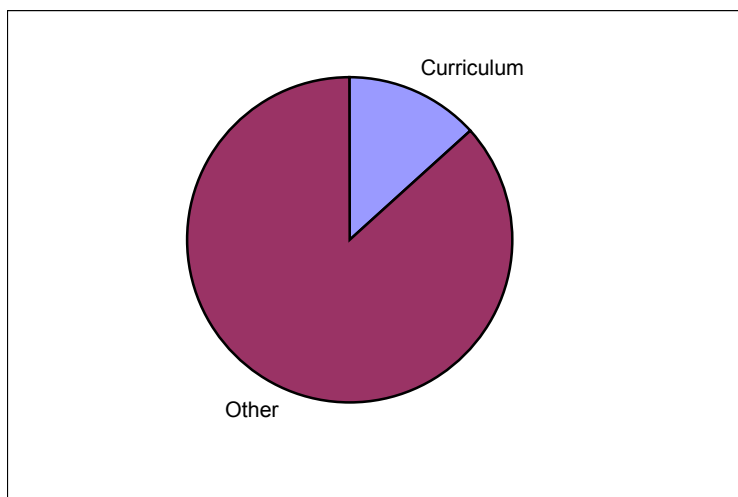
Also of significance is that only 6% of programs (4) have community involvement as a part of their focus.

GRAPH 1 STUDENT FOCUS OF PROGRAMS



The vast majority (87% or 45) of school programs devised for students identified by schools as “at-risk”, have a non-curriculum focus. Of these, 25% are directly intended to prepare students for leaving school through employment preparation.

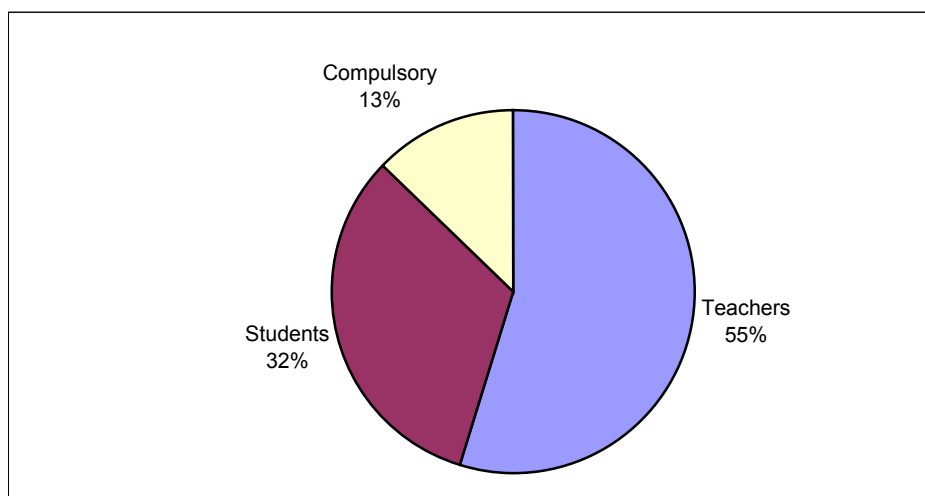
GRAPH 2 PROGRAMS BY FOCUS – CURRICULUM



Schools, it seems, are putting in a lot of time and effort into creating and maintaining a socially and emotionally supportive environment for “at-risk” students. At the same time, schools are devising considerable numbers of programs for students' direct departure to employment or further training.

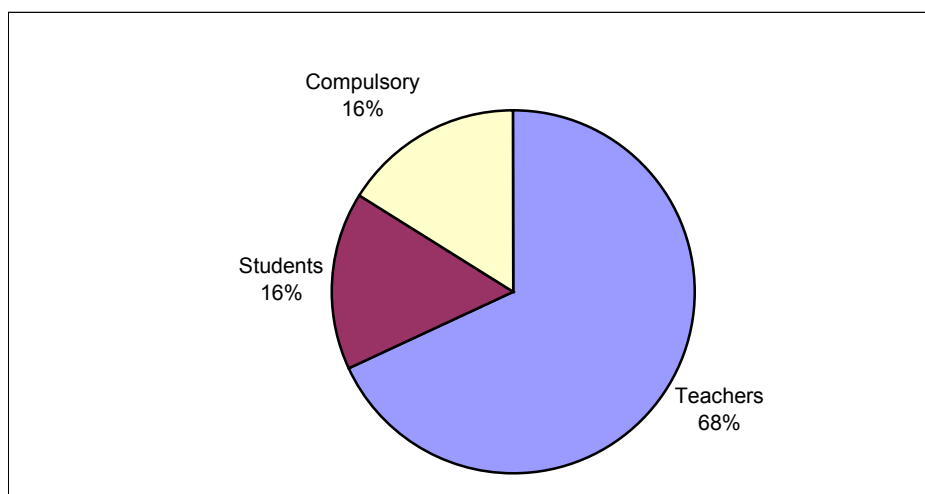
The extent to which students can choose to participate in these programs is also of interest. Of all the programs, only 13% (4) are compulsory for all students in a cohort (usually a year level).

GRAPH 3 “WHO CHOOSES” PROGRAM? (1)



Of the 32% (10) of programs that students are able to choose to participate in above, 6 of these have a well-being focus. This includes 4 Peer Support type programs that Year 11 students volunteer to be leaders or mentors for Year 7 students. When these six programs are removed from the analysis data and the remaining figures are recalculated, the actual distribution of choice of program is shown in Graph 4.4 below.

GRAPH 4 “WHO CHOOSES” PROGRAM? (2)



It appears from the preliminary data from teachers that the majority of the programs currently offered to students, whether they are compulsory, by teacher nomination or student selection, either are very socially supportive of students personal and well-being needs or are related to work experience. This reflects the recent research into the teaching practices and pedagogy of Queensland teachers (Lingard, B. et al. 2001a), which found that schools in the main are doing a very good job of being socially supportive of students. On the other hand, the same research indicated that what most teachers do least well is to provide intellectually challenging material that is also connected to the social and cultural worlds of students and which focuses on real world problems. Whether this can be said of programs in the study will need to be the subject of further analysis and informed by the material to be collected from the student focus groups, and guided by the findings of this review of the literature.

It could also be inferred from this data that schools seem to be more concerned with getting some students into suitable vocational employment as soon as is possible rather than assisting them to complete 12 years of education.

What *teachers* said about the programs

Following these surveys, interviews were conducted with 15 teachers⁵ in 5 of the school sites surveyed. The teachers interviewed were involved in organising the programs listed above. The fact that more than one teacher was interviewed at any one school is indicative of the multi-program offerings in these schools. Each teacher was interviewed using the same schedule of questions. The interviews were transcribed and then coded using N*Vivo Software informed by the following three questions:

1. How do teachers identify the issues? (*Naming and Framing - The Context of Influence*)
2. What do the teachers think is important to be done? How does this influence the selection of programs and the ordering of priorities of participation? What is included (and what is excluded)? What is the hierarchy (of discipline knowledge)? (*Selecting and Ordering – Context Productive*⁶)
3. To what extent are there possibilities and opportunities for students (or do they close doors) to succeed. Possibilities and Opportunities – Context Generative⁷

⁵ 'Teacher' is understood broadly in this report to include principals, assistant principals, year-level coordinators, and career advisors, as well as classroom teachers.

⁶ Lingard in Thomson 2002

⁷ Lingard in Thomson 2002

Naming and framing

In analysing the data we were interested in the first instance to ascertain how teachers understood the 'problems' that led to the creation of programs for students as alternatives to what schools had traditionally provided students.

With reference to this, most teachers suggested that the programs were important for 'students unable to cope in mainstream classes' (T#7) and for those 'struggling with classroom work particularly in literacy and numeracy' (T#5). In these teachers' view, the programs were designed for students who 'don't have the skills to go into a mainstream VCE ... [because] the kids couldn't get their minds around it' (T#7).

Comments were also made about the students' backgrounds as part of teachers' identification of the problem. For example, many teachers suggested that students in the programs 'come from really troubled backgrounds who perhaps don't have parental guidance – just things like appearance and manners that we take for granted' (T#11). Many also believed that these students 'don't have the academic ability to succeed' (T#7). Another commented that 'a lot of these kids come from fairly dysfunctional families ... there isn't a lot of parental respect of education' (T#1).

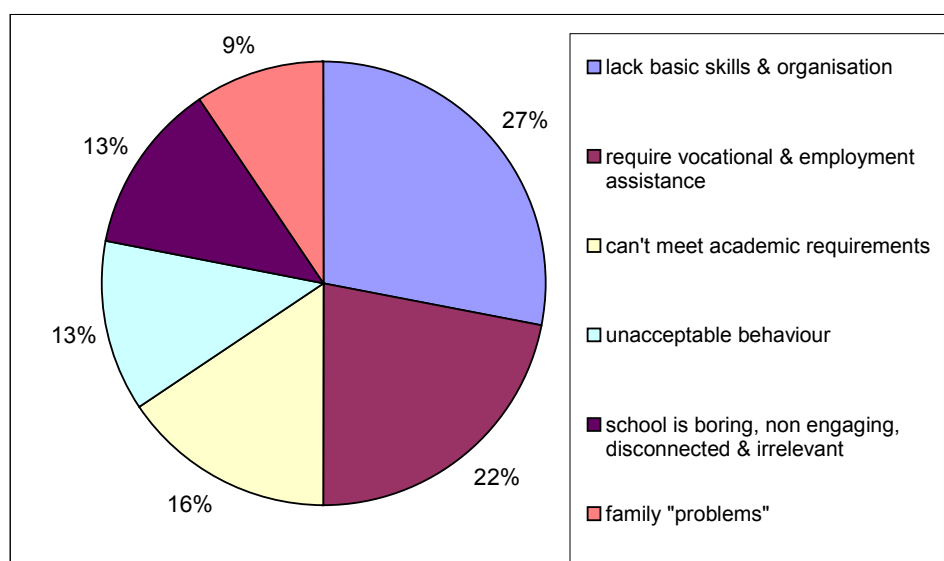
A third identified problem related to skills associated with gaining (typically 'blue-collar') employment. The programs in question were often described by teachers in the research as an 'entrée into the workforce' or an exercise in 'mapping out a career option for them' and 'making some sort of connection between actually passing and getting into the workforce effectively ... basically just training them for employment' (T#1). Another commented that 'we work through what are the competencies that are expected from kids, in simple terms and in basic employment terms' (T#2). One teacher who doubled as a Careers Advisor suggested that what the students need is support in 'making a decision as to what they might like to do, planning for the future ... and assisting them to make the transition' (T#3) from school to work.

Some teachers also suggested that the programs were sometimes instigated by 'staff [who] were looking for a way to deal with difficult students ... [who] were on their way down and out, if not down already' (T#4).

Only one school rejected the scenario of offering alternate programs, after having tried a withdrawal program for a number of years and 'decided quite deliberately that we would put a lot of our energy into restructuring our mainstream so it would engage all kids ... working on the notion that student engagement and positive relationships were the key to good educational outcomes' (T#4). Another teacher working in a school where attention is now focussed on pedagogy in mainstream classrooms said: 'We didn't want to do [an alternative program] as an add-on and just have a few kids working on that and someone trying to scabble together a bit of time to do it and then maybe it would fall in a heap after a year. We wanted it to be part of the mainstream' (T#5).

The following graph maps the distribution of these various accounts by teachers of student problems: why some students are 'at-risk' of poor retention, participation and achievement in education. The graph represents the 32 explanations received from the 15 teachers in the study. That is, most teachers offered more than one explanation of 'the problem'.

GRAPH 5: NAMING AND FRAMING 'THE PROBLEMS'



Of the teachers who suggested that the 'problem' was students' lack of basic skills and organisational skills, most also suggested that these students lacked vocational education and employment skills. These two responses accounted for approximately half of all explanations by teachers of the problems to which the alternative programs were directed. There was an even stronger connection between those teachers who located the problem in the nature of school work (i.e. boring, irrelevant, etc.) with explanations of some students' inappropriate behaviour. This latter response is quantitatively different from the other accounts (which are primarily deficit in nature), in its recognition of the roles that teachers, schools and the schooling system play in producing problems for students. This critical reflection on the ways in which teachers 'do school' was particularly evident in the comments of one teacher who observed:

We're basically pissing them off with some pretty boring stuff at school ... it would be fair to say lots of teachers - and I guess it's probably true in all schools - are dishing out the same assignment, project test, unit of work. It's in the filing cabinet. They've done it for many years. And its boring the pants off the kids. ... We need to do something different because if we just keep doing the same old thing, then the same old, same old is not going to work. ... Let's have a look at what it is we are teaching and what's the relevance to kids (T#6)

This tended to be a minority view expressed by the group of teachers interviewed. Their explanation that students are disengaged from school because of the intransigence of teachers was embodied in the comment: 'I've always taught this way so why should I change'. (T#4)

Selecting and ordering

A second level of analysis focused on what teachers thought these programs should deliver for students; that is, what they thought was important to be done given the problems they had identified.

Several teachers had in mind to 'offer a modified course ... a work skills program where [students are] doing survival skills helping them to cope with just living skills' (T#7). In a similar vein, other programs were designed to 'offer them a course that's going to encourage them to come to school and to experience some success' and to 'teach the kids time management skills ... They have to be organised ... For the weaker kids who are at risk, that's potentially a problem ... so we provide them with study skills.' (T#8)

Some interpreted these provisions as offering a 'safety net' for students that can also 'keep them on track'. Other teachers supported the school's programs because their design was

such that 'kids could take a risk, try something a little bit more challenging rather than not trying because they're so worried about what everybody else will think' (T#5).

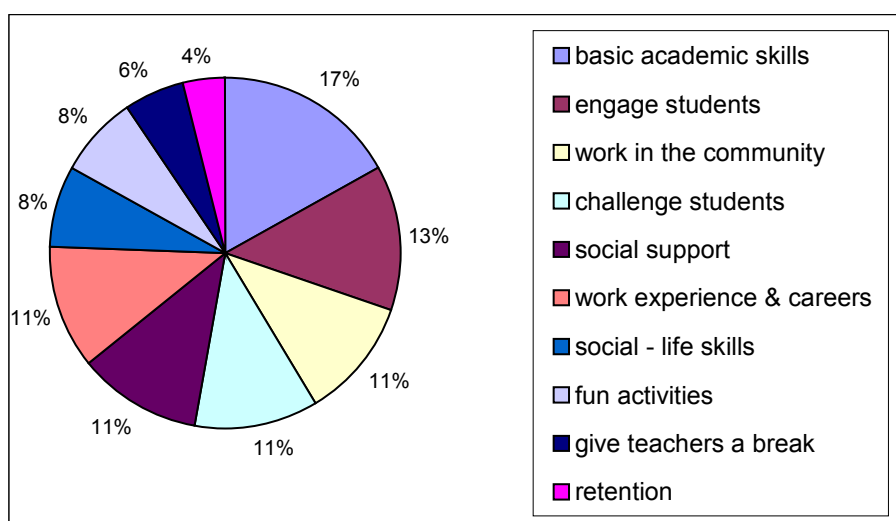
Dealing with interpersonal issues also featured in teachers' ideas about what needed to happen in the context of these programs. Hence, several programs dealt 'a fair bit with relationship stuff ... with building positive attitudes towards goal setting ... integrating some hands on and basic curriculum' (T#4). This teacher commented that he 'spends a lot of his time talking about kids being accepted' (T#4).

Perhaps related to these relational issues, some programs focused on the particular needs of boys: 'Ours is very much a boys' group and often the hard boys' group.' (T#2). For some, this was the intention – designed 'initially for the badly behaved boys' (T#5) – while other programs arrived at similar configurations by default: 'I've been surprised how many recalcitrant boys, at-risk boys' (T#6), are part of the program.

In pondering 'what to do?', relatively few teachers suggested that 'the idea is to get them out of the classroom and engaged in real life activities to develop their learning as well as their skills ... one of the key things is engagement' (T#5). This particular teacher was of the view that improved attendance and successful learning depends on 'students who are enthusiastic and excited about learning, who want to be here and who are really striving to achieve their best' (T#5).

The following graph illustrates the variations in these responses by teachers to the selection and ordering of program activities: what should be done for 'at-risk' students in the context of alternative programs. The graph represents the 53 responses of the 15 teachers in the research, suggesting that on average each teacher offered approximately 3 different responses.

GRAPH 6: SELECTING AND ORDERING PROGRAM ACTIVITIES



Skill development and vocational experience again feature strongly in teachers' comments about the appropriate activities and intended outcomes for alternative programs. There was even mention by a few that one of their purposes was to serve the interests of teachers:

These kids - a large percentage of them – didn't get to go on the year 8 school camp because they have behavioural issues and they're not really welcomed ... I think [the other teachers] appreciate the fact that I'm taking them off their hands and reducing the frustration for them in some classes. (T#3)

Of course, the perceived benefits of programs for teachers was insignificant in the context of the full range of teachers' responses. Of greater significance were the small number of teachers who identified student engagement (with learning, community, challenges, etc) as the preferred characteristic of alternative programs. Again, these teachers tended to adopt a critical reflective stance in questioning their practices:

There's something missing in year 9 or there could be something done in year 10 ... I'm noticing that maybe the Science program is not working for 50% of the kids .. is there an issue here? T#3)

Possibilities and opportunities

A third level of analysis applied to the teacher interviews involved a consideration of the possibilities and opportunities for students to achieve 'success'; specifically, improved retention, participation and academic achievement.

In relation to this, one teacher asked rhetorically:

'Did more students stay on at school? I must admit that would be a nice little aim or objective of the program. I think in the back of my mind that might have been a part of it; but I didn't really have that as one of the objectives.' (T#1).

However, retention and participation are clear aims for many programs:

'The students have nowhere to go if they don't finish Year 10. And even if they finish Year 10, it's a struggle. There's a lot of cajoling and kidding along but we get a majority through to the end of year 10'(T#7)

For some programs, academic achievements seemed to be reserved for other students back in the 'mainstream':

'If you've got these particular students out [of mainstream classes], they're not causing disruption and not taking away from other students who are in the class hoping to succeed, it means that the classroom teachers are able to focus on teaching rather than disciplining these particular students. ... It lessens the strain on teachers in their classes.' (T#7).

Other programs seemed destined to fail its students. As one school discovered, when:

'We dumped all the difficult kids together [we] discovered that some of them got more difficult because they were learning difficult behaviours from their mates.' ... The kids were chosen for all the wrong reasons. I think the systemic stuff that sits underneath behavioural issues wasn't addressed.' (T#4)

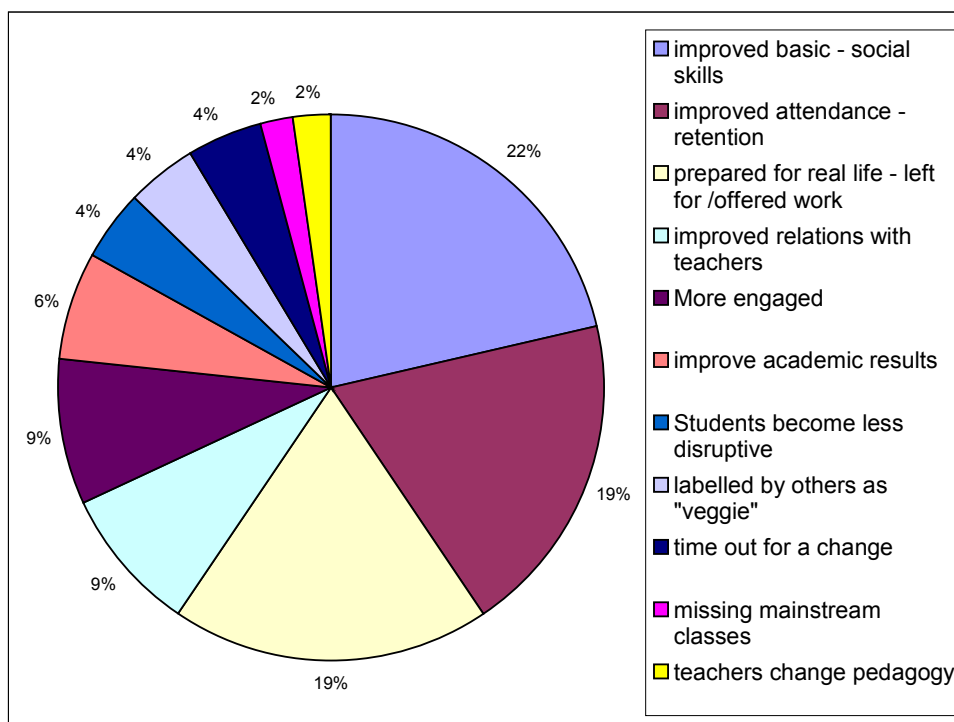
Quite apart from these internal difficulties, there is a certain stigma associated with programs that involve students' withdrawal from mainstream classes: 'everybody knows that they're doing something different ... "Oh we're the veggie group"'(T#7).

Alternatives to alternative programs, and their associated problems, were identified by teachers when the program was integrated into the curriculum. Paradoxically, it 'wasn't seen as completely alternative and on the edge [so] we got a broad range of kids [opting in] ... not just the at-risk kids ... the kids are very positive about it. For some, its primarily the reason they're at school ... we just regard this as a better opportunity for the kids and a better system' (T#10). Another teacher suggested that the students often feel 'I've got something I'm looking forward to so I can put up with stuff that might be a little humdrum' (T#6), thereby creating opportunities for them to 'broaden their horizons' (T#7). In short, the retentive power of these integrated programs was championed by several teachers: 'I think the kids feel pretty proud that they've part of the program, I think they're proud of the school. I'd have to think it encourages those kids to stay a little bit longer because ...they might like to take part in it' (T#2).

Reflecting Teese et al.'s (2003) observation that all school leaving is not bad, many teachers interviewed also noted that 'quite a number of students [left] to employment. That was seen as a positive outcome' (T#4). And for many teachers, it is a natural one: to prepare 'students to go out into the community and show that they can be responsible and hold down a job reliably' (T#2). Hence, most teachers believed that programs are successful if 'you end up with kids who finish year 10 and can eventually work in the community' (T#1). However, this is quite a different appreciation for school leaving from the view expressed by one teacher who regarded some students' expulsion approvingly: 'we have no qualms about not having them in the school. We think they're better off and we're better off' (T#4).

The variety of views expressed by teachers on the possibilities and opportunities created by the programs was striking. This is evidenced in the following graph, which represents the 47 different program outcomes imagined by the 15 teachers in the study.

GRAPH 7: POSSIBILITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR POSITIVE OUTCOMES



Of particular interest in this array is the combination of 'more engaged', 'change pedagogy' and 'improved teacher-student relations' in the responses by a small group of teachers. Not only were the programs about which these teachers spoke almost indistinguishable from what all students did, from these comments the teachers seemed focused on different aspects of program design:

If we continue a normal program, the kids will be off the rafters or whatever ... kids should be able to do something they want to do, something that is relevant to them, interesting and – that beautiful word – worthwhile. (T#1)

By shifting the focus from a group of 'problem' students to their own teaching practice, these teachers claimed remarkable achievements by their students. However, two caveats need to be made in relation to this summation of successful programs. Firstly, 'I think the word 'change' is sometimes fairly threatening. Teachers tend to be fairly conservative people' (T#9). These teachers' views were clearly in the minority in the study. Their counsel is that changing the views of others is difficult work. Second, 'I think [the program is] beneficial for a percentage of the students but it depends on who you talk to. Some students have found it very good and some haven't; some are fairly positive about it' (T#1). From this teacher's comments, it seems that there is not one perfect program that can be imported from elsewhere and achieve instant success for students. Even at its origins it will not achieve positive results for all students. However, this has not stopped these teachers from believing in particular program design principles, with similarities to those listed at the end of the Literature Review.

What students said about the programs

Naming and Framing

In analysing the data we were interested in the first instance to ascertain how students understood the 'problems' that led to the creation of these programs as alternatives to what schools had traditionally provided to the mainstream.

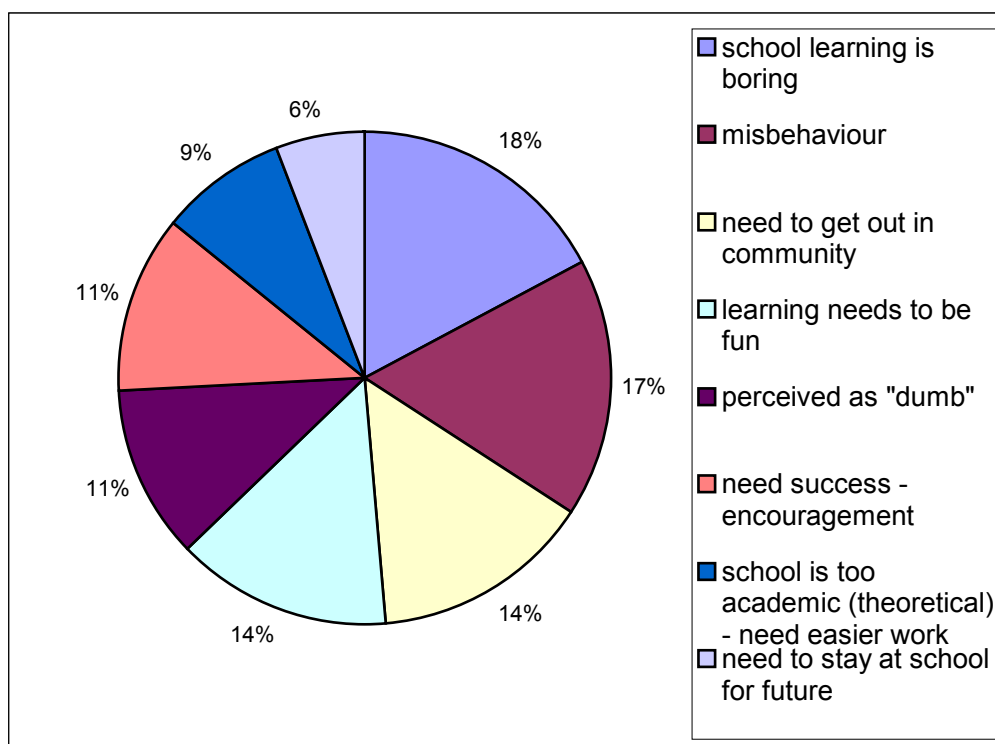
Many of the students commented that 'school's too boring.' (S#1) and that 'it was just crap because ... all the work, just got on your nerves and having to do homework every night and that sort of stuff' (S#2). Students also suggested that the work in the previous year was too difficult:

Some teachers came and spoke to me because I'd been having a few days off in Year 9. I just couldn't cope because that's like the hardest year, I reckon, Year 9. There's a building up to get into Year 10 and that. So I just went and spoke to one of the teachers about it and they said, "Yes, I think you'd be very good [in an alternative program]. You know, you get to go to work experience one day a week, that would be a bit easier, instead of coming to school five days a week." So I just thought, I knew I could get success.' (S#3)

Another suggested that the only reason her brother stays at school is 'probably because he's scared of what dad's going to say when he tells him he's going to drop out' (S#4). Several also reported that: 'some people think we're dumb ... I just kept getting told that I was a dumb-arse' (S#5). Others observed, 'I suppose I was like most of the other Year 9s, just struggling with keeping up with work and stuff' (S#6). At the same time, many of the students commented that the reason for their lack of achievement was due to the fact that 'We played up pretty bad last year' (S#7), while others took a more laissez faire approach to their schooling: 'it was just idiots who didn't want to be there, that said, "Oh yeah, we'll just go to Year 10"' (S#3) and then leave.

These students' naming and framing of the 'problems' carry few surprises. The following graph represents the 8 categories the 15 students' 35 different explanations of the 'problems' that these students face in their schooling.

GRAPH 8: NAMING AND FRAMING 'THE PROBLEMS'



One of the most significant messages evident in these responses is the positioning of students in relation to their learning. While about one third pointed to the teaching they receive as the reason for their poor retention, participation and academic achievement ('school is boring', 'learning needs to be fun', etc.), most attributed their problems to themselves. Certainly, some identified these problems to be a function of how others saw them rather than how they would like to perceive themselves, although there was a degree of acceptance of this positioning even if with some resentment.

However, rather than changing these perceptions, the alternative programs offered to these students – particularly those operating outside the mainstream – tended to reinforce their views or at least failed to address them in any significant way. That is, even though within the programs a certain degree of success was achieved and distance was established from negative accounts of their achievements, most of these students were well aware that 'in the real world' of mainstream schooling their credentials remained suspect. And, to some degree, their participation in the programs reinforced this view in the eyes of others.

Selecting and ordering program activities

A second level of analysis focused on what students thought these programs should deliver; that is, what they thought was important to be done given the problems they had identified.

Almost all the students suggested that it was very important to get 'out into the workforce' and not be put under the pressure of a 5 days a week, 8 periods a day, school program. This was well illustrated in the comments of one student concerning her brother: 'he hates school. It's because you're locked in a classroom and all you do is theory' (S#4). By comparison, out-of-school activities were viewed more favourably because they 'introduced us to the workforce more ... [and] built on basic things like Maths and that ... I just feel it's easier work' (S#5).

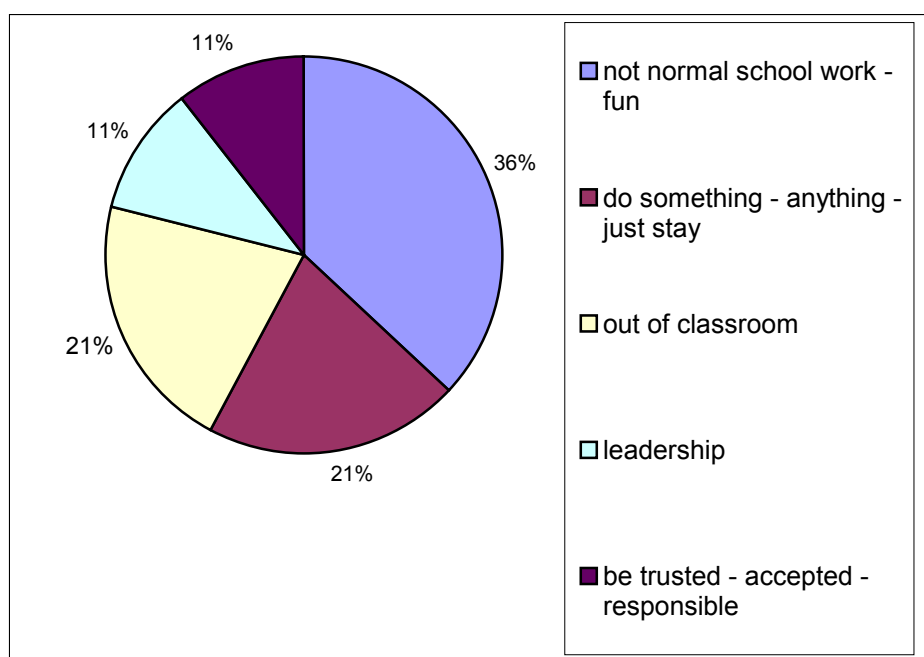
Commenting on this proposition that the modified work involved in alternative programs was easier, many students regarded the programs as 'a bludge' (S#7) and held the view that 'it'll be easy; they're the ones that used to muck around and that. These people [just] stayed on for something to do' (S#3). Without discounting the responsibility of students to account for their own actions, other student responses implied that how the programs were structured contributed to how they responded. For example, bemoaning the fact that student input into the program content was not possible, one student explained:

We never got a chance to discuss with the teachers, these activities, whether they were meeting our needs, whether we had suggestions for other components to the program. They [teachers] didn't really ask us what we thought of the program. (S#8)

Also, a number of students were aware that teachers were prepared to use their participation in alternative programs as a stick to get them to behave 'because all the kids, mostly, were males and mucking around [so the teachers] used to be always at us, "If you don't do your work you may as well not come to school"' (S#7).

The following graph represents in 5 categories the 19 different responses of the 15 students in the study concerning what they were looking for in alternative programs and, indeed, within mainstream schooling.

GRAPH 9: SELECTING AND ORDERING PROGRAM ACTIVITIES



From several of the students' responses, it would be tempting to suggest that what students think alternative programs should offer them is not what they are being offered. In most of the programs in this study, this is not the case; the activities of many programs within the schools can be described in terms that the students themselves have used.

However, what can be said is that this is not how several students experience these programs. This is not simply illustrative of a disjuncture between perception and reality. It points to a more fundamental principle of engaging programs that seek to involve students with teachers in the negotiation of program curricula, pedagogy and assessment. The involvement of students in determining their own activities makes sense in the context of their growing maturity and desire for independence. It also explains why some students see the rigors of the school day as confining, whereas the similar 'nine-to-five' grind of the workplace is somehow liberating. Work offers young people (at least in appearance) access to social goods, relationships and freedoms typically restricted to adults, within which the opportunity to negotiate – to be able to decide for oneself – is central. Hence, programs that contained a workplace component were popular among the students, although not entirely for reasons that their teachers might have anticipated: 'getting into the workforce was the best part of it because you were out one day a week ... so you were only at school four days' (S#7).

Possibilities and opportunities for positive outcomes

A third level of analysis applied to the student interviews involved a consideration of the possibilities and opportunities for them to achieve 'success'; specifically, improved retention, participation and academic achievement.

As noted above, students in the focus groups were in broad agreement that the work in the alternative programs was far too basic and easy: 'some of it was based on stuff that I already knew beforehand ... [it was] too easy ... and it was just a revision sort of thing (S#12); in fact, 'all the work was easy' (S#2). Another identified the *busy work* in what they were often asked to do in the programs: 'they used to just hand us a bunch of paper and it would be stapled together and it was a heap of clues like puzzles and you've got to crack the code to spell the out the word. And it was just a heap of them (S#14). The problem was 'we already knew it. Yes it could have been more challenging. Like, most of the skills we did, ... it was just basic ... stuff like that that we'd already done in Year 7, 8 and 9' (S#2).

Reflecting on his disappointment with the absence of intellectual challenges in the program, one commented that he liked to 'learn something new, yes, because I like to learn' (S#1). Others had different feelings towards learning: 'we always judge that learning is going to be boring' (S#4). In this case, it was related to the student's past experiences of didactic forms of teaching and her desire for 'a different style of learning ... more hands on rather than reading off a board and writing in a book' (S#4).

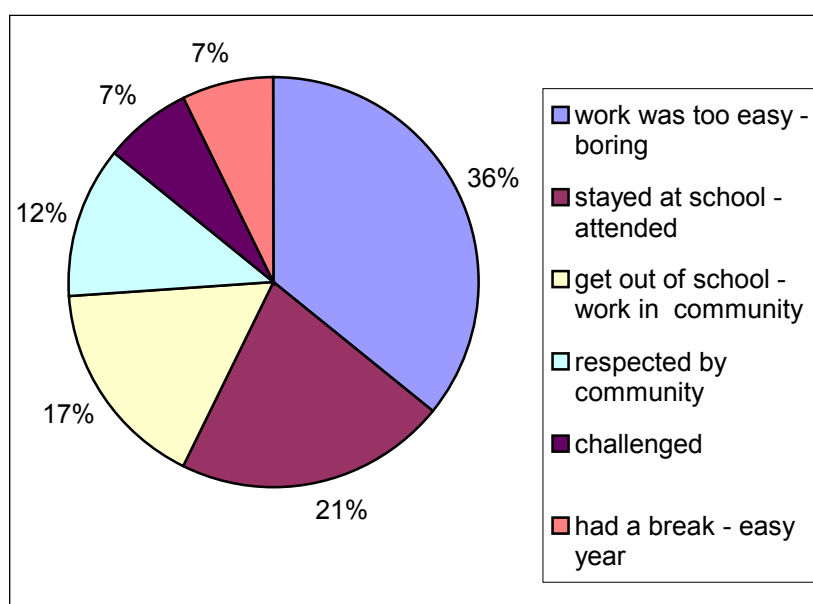
In an attempt to explain the reason why many of the students were badly behaved in the alternative programs, one student confessed that 'we played up pretty bad last year ... because some of the work that some of the teachers were giving us – like a Grade 2 could do' (S#7). Another lamented 'the work that they used to give you, because it was so easy – not always so easy but just small amounts of it' (S#3). From the students' perspective, there seemed to be no recognition of their desire to be intellectually challenged. Indeed, the challenges teachers offered them tended to be of a different kind:

They [teachers] just expected you to finish it and if you didn't then they just felt as though you were wasting their time, you know, why be in [the program] and then they used to just say, 'Well, if you're not going to do it, you can get out of [the program].' So it was like a threat ... Teachers used to say to us, 'Do your work or else you're not going to be in class any more. (S#3).

For others, the outcomes for students were seen as very positive. 'I reckon whoever made this program up has been very smart about it. They've realized that people do need help – and they've helped them out by making this program – and I'm sure I probably would have left ... [you should] stay here as long as you can' (S#6) or 'go to school for as long as you can and get a good education' (S#5). Indeed, staying on at school – student retention – was seen by students themselves as a positive outcome: 'I knew that if I stayed and did all my work that I could, that I was able to do at school, I could get ... a bit further in life' (S#12). However, 'hanging in' at school seemed to have little to do with improving their participation and academic achievement. Rather, it was a matter of pragmatics: 'some people just did it [the alternative program] because – to get apprenticeships you have to have a Year 10 pass and [the alternative program] was the easy way to do it. It was all easy work, so you just do that and then you go on, pretty much' (S#2).

The outcomes students saw for themselves in the programs in which they participated are summarised in the following graph. It represents in 6 categories the 42 different responses that students made in the focus groups regarding their view of the possibilities and opportunities (and absence of them) of these programs.

GRAPH 10: POSSIBILITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR POSITIVE OUTCOMES



The opportunity to contribute to the community and make a difference both to the community and the community's perception of young people, led to the lengthiest and most eloquent exchanges by and between students in the focus groups:

Working on our community links changes the stereotypes that adults see of children - I mean they think that our generation now, we just go out, vandalize, make a mess and then get into trouble. It's not true ... you can't generalize it for everyone; but I think the community actually appreciates the work that we're doing now - all the work we're doing is benefiting the school, the community as a whole (S#8).

Programs in which students were able to make a real and significant contribution to their communities figured highly in the students' estimations. The reasons for this are similar to those expressed above with regard to the benefits of workplace programs: 'it's good to know that they [the community and the school] don't feel like we're just children, [that] we're here to make trouble and stuff. We're not because we do want to benefit – we want things to be better for our community because we do live in this society, in our community, so we want it to be better' (S#8).

For students, then, positive outcomes for alternative programs are those that make them feel valued and through which they gain a sense of making a valuable contribution to the benefit of others

Conclusion (s)

This final section of this paper brings together understandings derived from the review of good program design principles discussed in the academic and research literature – programs that promote increased student retention, participation and academic achievement – and compares this with non-traditional and non-systemic programs in the secondary schools studies. The organization of this comparison utilises the four concluding statements at the end of the literature review.

Much of the literature on "risk" reflects a structural/deficit response. These responses, no matter how much they seem to champion social justice and equity are inevitably couched in the language of deficit. The deficit model is another form of the oppression and violence described by Bourdieu, (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990) where treating the learner as a victim inhibits the full engagement and development of the potential of the learner.

These school and teacher responses to disengagement and alienation generally are to provide solutions to the future welfare of "at risk" populations mainly through the provision of

additional resources and reworked programs to promote equal treatment and equality of opportunity on the assumption that this will then lead to improved and equal results for all. This is done with the belief that it will even out the life chances for children at risk children (Knight 2002). For them the solution seems to be resource based - more money, more teachers, more computers and more schools in order to overcome "deficits that the children have as a result of their circumstances."

Individuals will no doubt benefit, but while there are no serious work choices for the disadvantaged youth and a decline in alternative pathways for "at risk" students then only students in the privileged group of society will be guaranteed the success that can come from a schooling that serves to extend social advantage to the few at the expense of the majority (Knight 2002, p. 101; Teese & Polesel 2003).

Schools have witnessed a rise in student disengagement from school and the curriculum and decreased student interest in social values and civic responsibility (Lingard, B. et al. 2001a, 2001b). The school programs and the teachers interviewed do not address these key issues but retreat to a deficit model - responding to disadvantage and relying on the provision of increased resources as a panacea. The structural inequalities that continue to advantage some and disadvantage other social groups are persistent and predictable. The inequality is not the result of individual attributes neither of the student, nor of cultural or other deprivation but the very nature of the socio-political system.

The recent research by Teese et al. (2003) confirms other international studies that middle class families get more out of the education system than working class and marginalised students. Therefore ways of assisting students "at-risk" to bridge the gap are hard to find. Labeling of schools, teachers and students as failures is unproductive - they need support not blame. Schools are then forced to show improvement by moving students on to other schools or into diversionary programs to 'give the other students and teachers a break.' The effective redistribution of students "at-risk" into special programs or into clusters of schools will not address the root cause of educational underachievement.

How do the school 'alternative' programs compare with 'good practice'?

As noted above, four main principles of good program design were identified in the review of the academic and research literature:

1. Successful programs are both mainstream and relevant, reflecting real world problems. They do not focus on remediation or basic skills, nor are they based on withdrawal or separate programs for the few chosen to participate.

In contrast to the principles of good programs derived from the literature review, the majority of the school programs researched in this study focussed on the remediation of students' basic skills without the active involvement of students themselves in determining the nature of the programs. Of these, 25% were directly intended to prepare students for leaving school as soon as possible through employment preparation. The vast majority of programs devised for students identified by schools as 'at-risk', had a non-curriculum focus and were implemented on a withdrawal basis for teacher-selected individuals. These programs were developed by the teachers with little if any input or consultation with students and were separate and often in contrast to the mainstream curriculum. Indeed, students involved in some programs were often at a disadvantage in returning to the mainstream program of their peers. Two schools, which had tried but rejected withdrawal and remediation programs, acknowledged that changes to mainstream pedagogy would benefit not only students 'at-risk' but also all students.

2. Successful programs are socially supportive, intellectually challenging and respond to student needs both current and in the long term.

Analysis of the survey data indicated that as the literature suggests is necessary, the school programs are very socially supportive of their students. More than 40% of these programs were concerned with helping students to 'fit in' with school expectations, focusing on student 'well-being', behaviour modification and life skills. However, what both the student and teacher interviews emphasised (although in very different ways) was that what these

programs do least well is provide intellectually challenging material that is connected to the social and cultural worlds of students. While schools had identified that remediation, withdrawal and 'more of the basics' were important for students, the students often found these programs to be too easy, irrelevant and 'boring'. The data also reveal that what is thought to represent the current and long-term needs of students, is determined by the school and teachers without any significant (or any) input from students themselves.

3. The selection and training of the participating teachers is crucial, supported by a leadership environment that promotes a professional learning community within the workplace.

In line with recommendations in the literature, the overwhelming majority of teachers involved in these programs were specially (or self) selected and many had specific training and / or skills necessary to work with 'at-risk' students. Most schools also had the support of the leadership team in the development and implementation of these programs.

4. Successful programs actively involve and connect to the students' world and the community.

It appears from the school survey data that many of the programs are related to forms of work experience that are regarded by the students as very important and helpful. Both teachers and students made very positive remarks in relation to the active involvement of students in programs that connected them to their own community in realistic ways and which also increased the community's respect for students. Students overwhelmingly stated that what they wanted was to be involved in programs that were both intellectually engaging and challenging as well as being 'fun'.

Recommendations

One conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that dedicated, tied-funding provided for 'at-risk' students appears to encourage piece-meal and withdrawal approaches to program design. This makes student retention, participation and academic achievement more difficult to sustain without these interventions being linked and articulated to mainstream programs.

In response to this and other issues identified in this research, we recommend for consideration by schools:

1. programs that are fully integrated into the mainstream of school activity;
2. the inclusion of intellectually challenging material for students 'at educational risk';
3. focusing on teacher practice that better meets the needs of all students but in particular those 'at-risk';
4. action research and professional learning to assist teachers in the production of pedagogies that engage students in learning;
5. taking account of students' own reasons for why they are disengaged from schooling; and
6. considering the interests and involvement of students in decision-making processes.

Concluding remarks

School and teacher responses to disengagement and alienation identified in this research seek to provide solutions to the future of 'at risk' students, mainly through the provision of remedial programs. This is often done with the belief that these programs will even-out the life chances for students at-risk (Knight 2002).

However, Luke et al. (2003) counsel that it is important than any programs offered by schools ensure 'that those students who currently derive the least benefit from their middle schooling years are provided with enhanced opportunities to attain academic and social outcomes from their learning that are of value in the difficult transitions and pathways that many need to negotiate in the years ahead' (Luke et al. 2003. p. 9).⁸ That is, we do at-risk students few

⁸ See Appendix 2 for a more complete summary of Luke et al's recommendations.

favours by removing them from mainstream programs and pathways, thereby diminishing their knowledge and skill base and potentially constraining their futures.

But if we retain at-risk students in mainstream classes, what then? The research literature suggests that teachers have 'the power to tip the scale from risk to engagement' (Lingard et al., 2001). As demonstrated in this research, a proliferation of student programs will not necessarily meet the needs of students 'at-risk'. The need is for both school and teacher pedagogical change to include intellectually challenging activities, connected to the lives of students. This may be more important in the long term for the health and well being of the region's young people – particularly marginalised and 'at-risk' youth – than short-term gains for schools and systems from programs that merely retain 'bums on seats'.

Appendix One: Reports Reviewed

The Literature Reviewed

A method of analysis on which you can base a method of teaching is put to the hardest test of practice ... [when] you have to find it somewhere on the ground... [A]ny analysis, however academic and theoretical has to submit to that kind of test. (Raymond 1989, p. 177)

The literature on “at-risk” students is large to the extent of being overwhelming. However there are a number of seminal research works that are repeatedly cited across the literature. A number of Australian government reports commissioned by the Department of Education and Youth Affairs but written independently by various academic researchers were reviewed.

National Research

The following major reports and meta reviews were analysed.

Successful outcomes for youth “at-risk”: A Resource Kit. Australian National Training Authority. <http://www.det.nsw.edu.au/youth>

Innovation And Best Practice In Schools: Review Of Literature And Practice
<http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/publications/2001/fss/index.htm>

Full Service Schools Programme 1999 and 2000 National Evaluation Report
<http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/publications/2001/fss/evaluation.pdf>

Doing It Well: Case Studies of Innovation and Best Practice in Working with “at-risk” Young People
<http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/publications/2001/fss/doing.pdf>

Innovation and Best Practice in Schools: Review of Literature and Practice
<http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/publications/2001/fss/bestpractice.pdf>

Building Relationships: Making Education Work. A Report on the Perspectives of Young People
<http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/publications/2001/fss/buildingrelationships.pdf>

Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study 2001

International research

OECD Proceedings Preparing Youth for the 21st Century: The Transition from Education to the Labour Market: Proceedings of the Washington D.C. Conference -- 23-24 February 1999. <http://www.mszs.si/eurydice/pub/oecd/youth.pdf> OECD, August 1999.

Innovating Schools. OECD, April 1999.
<http://www.mszs.si/eurydice/pub/oecd/inovating.pdf>

What Works in Innovation in Education: Motivating Students for Lifelong Learning. OECD, 2000. <http://www.mszs.si/eurydice/pub/oecd/lifemot.pdf>

Making the Curriculum Work. OECD, November 1998.
<http://www.mszs.si/eurydice/pub/oecd/kurikulum.pdf>

Overcoming Failure at School. OECD, November 1998.
<http://www.mszs.si/eurydice/pub/oecd/failure.pdf>

Appendix Two: Beyond the Middle

The recent report *Beyond the Middle* (Luke et al. 2003) makes the following relevant observations that are summarised below:

1. That funding support and professional development, as well as directive policy, program and curriculum development initiatives generates better, more dedicated and consolidated interventions. (p. 5)
2. That dedicated, tied-funding provided for 'at-risk' 'target groups' (e.g., Aboriginal/Islander, LBOTE/NESB, lower socio-economic) appears to encourage piece-meal and pull-out approaches. (p. 5)
3. That withdrawal and 'pull out' programs made student improvement more difficult to sustain unless such interventions were linked and articulated to the mainstream program (p. 6)
4. That teacher leaders with a clear philosophy, coupled with strong pedagogic and curricular focus can act as internal change agents (p. 6)
5. That whole-school mainstream pedagogy and curriculum programs need revision and modification to patterns of teaching, learning and assessment in order to improve outcomes for target group students. (p. 6) the spread and mainstreaming of approaches to teaching and learning that stress higher order thinking and critical literacy, greater depth of knowledge and understanding and increases in overall intellectual demand and expectations (p. 8)
6. That whole-school programs that emphasized pastoral care and the well-being of students do not improve social outcomes for 'at-risk' students. (p. 6)
7. That programs that are 'connectedness to the world' in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment can generate improved academic and social outcomes for students, especially those from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds. (p. 6)
8. That programs that have 'recognition of difference' in classroom teaching can produce systematic and sustainable interventions that could serve the needs of target group students. (p. 7)
9. That higher order intellectual engagement is necessary in programs in order for all to access employment and to pursue improved life pathways through school to post-compulsory study, work and community life. (p. 7) Emphasis on intellectual demand and student engagement in mainstream pedagogy must moves beyond increased participation rates and basic skills development. (p. 8)
10. That assessment procedures should focus on higher order intellectual outcomes from all schooling programs. (p. 7)
11. That programs should emphasise curricular integration (p. 7)
12. That we need to have a much fuller, research-based understanding of what is going on every day in school classrooms
13. That peer-based reflection and self-analysis by teachers on pedagogy, and on the quality of resulting student work is required to improve student outcomes.(p. 9)

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