

# The power of historical causal components involved in engaging at risk youth at three alternative schools

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## *Abstract*

This article addresses the causal powers associated with the social phenomena of alternative schooling for youth at risk. It stems from a doctoral thesis, *Alternative Schooling Programs for At Risk Youth – Three Case Studies* (under examination) which addresses wider issues integral to alternative schooling: youth at risk, alternative schooling models, and literacy. This article explores one aspect of alternative schooling: the historical causal factors involved in the establishment and continuance of three alternative case study models in Queensland, Australia. By adhering to Bhaskar's transformational model of social activity (TMSA)<sup>1</sup>, social structures and individuals will be analytically distinguished to uncover their separate causal powers and how these have effected the establishment and continuance of three alternative schools.

## *1 Contextualization*

In the education milieu globally there is a concern about young people who fail to complete compulsory years of schooling, now averaging 12 years in the developed world. This is tied to a concern about the inadequate literacy skills of those young people who drop out of or are ejected from mainstream schooling. In Queensland Australia 10,000 such young people exist. They are deemed educationally 'at risk' and often experience a continuum of other social 'risk factors' in their lives. To re-engage such youth, a variety of alternative schooling programs have developed across the world. The author's doctoral study (under examination) investigated the issues of youth at risk, alternative schooling and literacy at three case study sites in Queensland. Each case study site represented a different model of alternative schooling.

Data was collected over a one year period from three case study sites, each of which exemplified a different model of alternative schooling. The first case study site followed the Flexi School Model, which allowed for either teacher or non teacher staffing. To individually tailor programs for students aged 14 to 18, this school utilized the Brisbane School of Distance Education curriculum and further curriculum components from the local high school and/or nearby technical colleges. The second case study model, a rural Alternative Education Centre was one of five trial annexes established by Queensland's State Education Department with teachers developing individual programs for students aged 9 to 15. The third case study model was an ongoing one year program designed for youth at risk aged 14 to 18, titled Certificate I in Vocational Access for Youth At Risk. This program took place at a Brisbane suburban Technical and Further Education College (TAFE), which had previously been a Senior College for years 11 and 12. Data was collected through observations of classroom practice, gathering of work and administrative samples, and individual interviews with six students and three teaching staff from each site. Return visits/phone calls to each site continued for a further two years. The data collection period was three years in total.

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<sup>1</sup> Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism - a Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1979.

To analyse the data, rather than focussing as many previous studies had on what happened at these sites, this doctoral study utilized critical realism to discover why and how events happened.<sup>2</sup> This was a process of revealing underlying and often unobserved causal powers facilitating or blocking engagement and learning. As an explanatory analysis it adhered to the critical realist *raison d'être* that of underlabouring for human emancipation.<sup>3</sup> To determine causality a critical social scientific (CSS) process as commented on by Sayer<sup>4</sup> was followed, albeit in a modified format. Cognisant of Sayer's critique that the CCS process lacked a robust discussion of normative issues involved, and often denied *carte blanche* that 'ought' can be derived from 'is' there was a modification of the third step with an added fifth step. The modified CSS process comprised the following steps:

*Problem Identified* – Event/Circumstance;

*Problem's Source* – Cause identified: interaction of *which* triggering mechanisms of structures or of individuals interacted to block or constrain processes/agency;

*Passing A Negative Judgement* – On need to remove/supply triggering mechanisms; 'ought to' statements deriving from 'is', 'ceteris paribus';

*Source Removal* – Remediating action 'ceteris paribus';

*Other Possible Implications of Problem Removal* – Contingencies.

This modified CSS process was embedded within a methodological framework developed by Danermark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen, and Karlsson.<sup>5</sup> Claiming to integrate the essential parts of earlier critical realist explanatory models: RRRE and DREI, Danermark et al. referred to their model as 'An Explanatory Model of Critical Realism' where 'abduction and retroduction play central roles',<sup>6</sup> and where there is a certain back and forth in the research process moving from concrete to abstract to concrete. It consisted of 6 stages:

Stage 1: Description

Stage 2: Analytical Resolution

Stage 3: Abduction/Theoretical Resdescription

Stage 4: Retroduction

Stage 5: Comparison between different Theories and Abstractions

Stage 6: Concretization and Contextualization

Danermark et al.'s model became the method for identifying the nub of the research problem, its source, and offering value judgements based on mechanisms uncovered and possibilities of remediating actions along with possible contingent implications.

### Defining Causal Components

In terms of the CSS process for determining causality: the overarching doctoral problem identified or concrete event was the educational disengagement/re-engagement of a number of young people at alternative schools. To discover the *how* and *why* of this event or problem several subsidiary problems were investigated. The subsidiary problem or concrete social phenomena this article addresses are three alternative schooling models, their establishment and continuance.

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<sup>2</sup> Stefan Moren and Bjorn Blom, 'Explaining Human Change. On Generative Mechanisms in Social Work Practice,' *Journal of Critical Realism*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Gary MacLennan and Peter Thomas, 'Cultural Studies - Towards a Realist Intervention,' in Justin Cruickshank ed., *Critical Realism - the Difference It Makes*, London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2003; Roy Bhaskar, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*, London: Verso, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Sayer, *Realism and Social Science*, London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Berth Danermark et al., *Explaining Society - Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

To locate the source/s of the problem or its causal mechanisms, social structures involved had to be identified and stratified. They were:

- schooling institutions – primary schools, mainstream high schools, alternative schools;
- governmental institutions – legislating bodies, education departments, social security departments;
- community institutions – insurance industry; community centres; local government facilities such as libraries.

Mechanisms, unlike in Moren and Blom<sup>7</sup> being conceived as theoretical abstractions, were concrete components of the former structures. They too were stratified and included:

- belonging to schools – types of teaching practices [e.g. andragogy/pedagogy/other], behaviour management practices, and attendance policies;
- belonging to governmental bodies – policy documents and publications, their discourses and sub discourses;
- belonging to community organisations – specific mechanisms of the institution [insurance industry: premiums] and expectations/ responsibilities/ behaviours associated with the use of community resources and facilities [e.g. community centre halls and associated set of expectations; council library and associated set of expectations].

Such causal mechanisms had the power, realised or unrealised, to generate or trigger a change or reproduce a social situation, dependent on the way they interacted. If they were activated they were then termed ‘generative mechanisms’.

However, causal mechanisms were not relegated to social structures. Human beings are a crucial factor in all social phenomena. So there were also causal mechanisms belonging to individual human beings as stratified agents. In *Reflections on Meta-Reality*, Bhaskar<sup>8</sup> outlines how he posits a view for critical realism of the stratified individual. He first describes ‘a three fold analysis of the self’ as ‘the ego, the embodied personality, and the transcendently real self’ with a further ‘stratification of our embodied personalities’ consisting of ‘minds and thoughts, our emotional makeup and feelings, and our physical bodies’ with generative mechanisms at every level.<sup>9</sup> Mindful of Bhaskar’s formulation of the individual, the doctoral research adhered to critical realist definition of human causality as *agency*,<sup>10</sup> and Bhaskar’s view of *agents* as stratified yet singular individuals who were connected to others.<sup>11</sup> This is slightly different to Archer’s conceptualising of *agents* as collectives of individuals differentiated from singular *actors*.<sup>12</sup>

The research therefore sought to first uncover which causal mechanisms were existent, whether belonging to individuals or social structures. It was then even more important to discover the active networks or relationships triggered by these causal mechanisms. Bhaskar emphasised this importance when he said:

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<sup>7</sup> Moren and Blom, 'Explaining Human Change. On Generative Mechanisms in Social Work Practice.'

<sup>8</sup> Roy Bhaskar, *Reflections on Meta-Reality*, New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London: Sage Publications, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 194, 96, 244.

<sup>10</sup> Mervyn Hartwig, 'Agency,' in Mervyn Hartwig ed., *Dictionary of Critical Realism*, London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Bhaskar, *Reflections on Meta-Reality*.

<sup>12</sup> Justin Cruickshank, 'Underlabouring and Unemployment: Notes for Developing a Critical Realist Approach to the Agency of the Chronically Unemployed,' in Justin Cruickshank ed., *Critical Realism: The Difference It Makes*, 2003; Margaret Archer, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

What I argued was that what defined the objects of social science, such as the family or the economy, had nothing to do with individuals or wholes, but **rather to do with sets of relations**.<sup>13</sup>

In line with a critical realist explanatory critique and as a corollary of discovering not only the relations, but abducting the essential or necessary relations existent in a particular sector of social life, in this case alternative schooling models, tendencies or causal laws had to be identified and tendency statements about the social phenomena made.<sup>14</sup> In this way by making explicit the power of hitherto invisible or tacitly known generative mechanisms, necessary relations and consequent tendencies this explanatory critique fulfils the purpose of a critical realist social research that of underlabouring for human emancipation and the promotion of the possibility of flourishing.<sup>15</sup>

## 2 Historical Causal Components

To begin the research process of explanatory analysis and employing Danermark et al.'s 'Explanatory Model of Critical Realism',<sup>16</sup> *Stage 1: Description* the author firstly, *described* the phenomena of alternative schooling programs taking place at three case study sites through uncritiqued staff narratives; secondly, *resolved* [*Stage 2*] staff narratives into imaginable historical causal components of 'generative events', 'prior schooling structures', 'models of alternative schooling', 'purpose', 'individual agency', and 'relations with linked community organisations'; and thirdly, by posing transcendental questions about each component used *retroduction* [*Stage 4*] to uncover structures, underlying mechanisms and powers, and individual agency.

Thus it was not till a combined implementation of *Stage 2: Analytical Resolution* and *Stage 4: Retroduction* that causality was able to be first addressed and the source of the research problem located.

To resolve purely descriptive staff narratives into imaginable historical causal components, previously uncritiqued narratives were interrogated through data coding and prior categories existent in the literature. Emerging historical components or categories were then interrogated by separate transcendental questions, thus revealing the causal powers and essential [necessary] relations of both individuals and social structures. To frame this retroductive explanatory analysis an overarching transcendental question was posed:

*What were the necessary conditions that brought each alternative schooling site into being, and made its continued existence possible?*

The following explanation ensued.

### 2.1 'Generative Events' and 'Prior Schooling Structures'

Regarding the 'generative events' at all case study sites, various individuals (parents, college administrators, state education personnel) *decided* certain young people needed an alternative schooling provision. This decision was *triggered by* the impact on these individuals by numbers of

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<sup>13</sup> Bhaskar, *Reflections on Meta-Reality*, p. 126.; emphasis author's

<sup>14</sup> Stathis Psillos, 'Causal Law,' in Mervyn Hartwig ed., *Dictionary of Critical Realism*, London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2007; Mervyn Hartwig, 'Causality,' in Mervyn Hartwig ed., *Dictionary of Critical Realism*, London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism - a Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*; ———, *Reflections on Meta-Reality*.

<sup>16</sup> Danermark et al., *Explaining Society - Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, p. 109.

young people 'not being able to handle' mainstream schooling, and conversely of mainstream schooling not being able to handle the 'youth at risk'. These were young people at risk educationally: who had a negative experience of mainstream schooling, who had been bullied or who had misbehaved in school, who truanted or dropped out of mainstream schooling. Some of these young people had further social risk factors in their lives such as physical and sexual abuse, homelessness, or economic deprivation.

Thus it was a sector of young people who failed or were failed by mainstream schooling, who were the triggering factor. The decision to establish alternative schooling at the case study sites was then generated from the interaction of two social groupings of individuals: adults familiarly or educationally related to, either at a macro or micro level, educationally at risk young people. Impacting on these initiating individuals were social structures and their related mechanisms, which formed the pre-existing context.

Retroductive questioning sought to uncover the necessary or key components of the 'prior schooling structures' at each site and their causal powers. Consequently the basic retroductive question about 'prior schooling structures' was varied to allow for site contextual variation of an open research system. Retroductive questions posed were:

*FLEXI SCHOOL*

*What were the intrinsic [necessary] conditions of the mainstream high schooling structure that caused some students 'not to be able to handle high school'? What was the intrinsic condition needed in an alternative model of schooling?*

*ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION CENTRE*

*What were the intrinsic [necessary] conditions associated with mainstream public schooling that necessitated the establishment of trial alternative forms of public schooling?*

*SUBURBAN TAFE YOUTH AT RISK PROGRAM*

*What were the intrinsic necessary conditions of the Community College structure that necessitated and allowed for an alternative program to be established within this schooling site?*

Staff narratives and literature surveyed provided the answers to these questions. Pre-existent or 'prior schooling structures' were at the micro and macro level. They consisted of local mainstream high schools, an innovative Senior College, as well as larger schooling structures of the State Education Department, and the Technical and Further Education College system.

*Mechanisms* of these various schooling structures were teaching and administrative approaches. These approaches were 'too officious' for Flexi School parents and staff, generating a need for something 'different' or 'alternative'. Progenitors of the Youth At Risk Program drew on the combined pedagogic and andragogic<sup>17</sup> teaching practices in place at their Senior Community College, but they also strove for something different seeking to specially modify teaching practices for youth at risk. These were mechanisms that were operating at the local or micro level. For the Alternative Education Centre, mechanisms of its prior schooling structure, Education Queensland operated at the macro level. These generative mechanisms were policy documents<sup>18</sup> containing ideas that triggered the establishment of the case study Alternative

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<sup>17</sup> Malcolm Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education. Andragogy Versus Pedagogy*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall/Cambridge, 1980.

<sup>18</sup> Education Queensland, 'The Next Decade - a Discussion About the Future of Queensland State Schools,' Brisbane: The Project Manager, Queensland State Education - 2010, 1999; ———, '2010 - Queensland State Education: A Future Strategy,' Brisbane: Education Queensland, Office of Strategic Planning and Portfolio Services, 2000, April.

Education Centre as one of five trial sites. Key triggering ideas were that some segments of the schooling population who were disadvantaged or at risk were also disrupting other students learning, and so there needed to be an equitable solution. These ideas were embedded in a wider current and geo-historical social and schooling discourses or mechanisms. The current discourses emanating from policy reports, included concern about a growing rich/poor divide, perceived behaviour problems in schools, increasing private school numbers, and need for skilled workers in globalized marketplace. Wider geo-historical education discourses impacting the reports were the school reform movement<sup>19</sup> and global concerns about national literacy standards.<sup>20</sup>

Thus the *causal power* of 'prior schooling structures' was embodied in the way their essential *mechanisms triggered* a reaction in certain *individuals*, which resulted in a decision to establish an emergent form of mainstream schooling for a sector of young people often labelled 'youth at risk'.

## 2.2 'Alternative Schooling Models'

Retroductive questioning to explain how each site chose a unique model of alternative schooling and how that model became an emergent form was as follows:

### FLEXI SCHOOL

*What were the intrinsic qualities of the Flexi Model that made it the model of choice for the inaugural parent group?*

*What were the emergent properties that altered the Flexi Model, and what were the factors that caused their emergence?*

### ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION CENTRE

*What were the intrinsic necessary qualities of the Alternative Education Schooling Model that made it the model of choice for the state education department?*

*What were the asymmetrically necessary structures and how did they formulate themselves differently at this site? [These were essential structures common to all sites but able to be modified according to site based factors.]*

### SUBURBAN TAFE YOUTH AT RISK PROGRAM

*What were the necessary intrinsic components of this alternative model of schooling, the Youth At Risk Program? And why were they chosen?*

*What were the necessary conditions that caused this schooling model to be relatively enduring in spite of the changing structure of the Community College?*

<sup>19</sup> F.M. Newmann and Associates, *Authentic Achievement – Restructuring Schools for Intellectual Quality*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996; Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, London: Calder and Boyars, 1971; ———, 'After Deschooling, What?', in Alan Gartner, Colin Greer, and Frank Riessman ed., *After Deschooling, What?*, London: Perennial Library, Harper and Row, Publishers, 1973; Education Queensland, 'New Basics Project, Technical Paper,' Brisbane: Access Ed. Education Queensland, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Rebecca J. Pasco, *Capital and Opportunity - a Critical Ethnography of Students at-Risk*, Lanham, Maryland, USA: University Press of America Inc., 2003; Jean Hebrard, 'Changes in Systems for Teaching Children to Read - the Emergence of New Requirements for European School Education Systems,' in Paul Belanger, et al. ed., *Literacy and Basic Education in Europe on the Eve of the 21st Century*, Strasbourg, Hamburg, Amsterdam/Lisse: The Council of Europe, UNESCO. The UNESCO Institute for Education, Swets & Zeitlinger B.V., 1992; Paul Belanger, Christiana Winter, and Angela Sutton, eds., *Literacy and Basic Education in Europe on the Eve of the 21st Century*, Strasbourg, Hamburg, Amsterdam/Lisse: The Council of Europe, UNESCO, The UNESCO Institute for Education, Swets & Zeitlinger B.V., 1992; Statistics Canada, 'Highlights from the Second Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey: Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society,' Ottawa, Canada: OECD and Human Resources Development Canada, 1997.

Causal *mechanisms* activated at all three centres resulted in their choice of alternative schooling model. These were essential or necessary mechanisms at both a macro and micro level inherent in both individuals and social structures. For example at a micro level were parents in a rural township whose action in choosing a certain form of alternative schooling was triggered by their desire [a mechanism at the level of the embodied personality<sup>21</sup>] to obtain a 'different' form of schooling for their children. However they were constrained by a mechanism of the state, legislation necessitating teacher devised curricula. Consequently they had chosen the Flexi School model which allowed for parent direction while utilizing curriculum materials from the Brisbane School of Distance Education.

However, the structure of the Flexi model utilized at this case study site evolved. It became an *emergent structure* administrated by the local high school, instead of being administrated by a parent/community management committee as was conceived in the original model. The social context impacting negatively on parent agency was an exponential increase in insurance premiums for community organisations. As parents did not have sufficient access to funding networks, funding became a final barrier to their participation. Full administrative responsibility was then passed to the local participating high school. In their interviews staff expressed strong concern that their Flexi School was now being pushed administratively in the direction of becoming too similar to mainstream high schooling, rather than something 'different'.

At the macro level, for the Alternative Education Centre, Education Queensland personnel had chosen a similar model in operation in government schools in the United Kingdom that of school annexes,<sup>22</sup> either on site or off site. In the 1980s these annexes in the United Kingdom had come to be known colloquially as 'sin bins', long term dumping grounds for disruptive students. Later under Margaret Thatcher they were called 'Pupil Referral Units' with a goal [a mechanism of schooling] of 'remediating' students and returning them to an accepting state school.<sup>23</sup> Education Queensland's annexes were an *emergent structure* with slightly differing mechanisms and substructures to the Pupil Referral Units of the UK.

The goal of Education Queensland's annexes was for both long and short term stays.<sup>24</sup> The necessary structures of this model were hierarchical administration by Education Queensland personnel devolving down to the local level, and site based teacher developed curricula for each individual student. So although the Alternative Education Centre was part of a macro level initiative, this model had variable substructures based on localized administrations. They were asymmetrically necessary components, components that were essential but varied in their application and were not mutually dependent. This meant components such as location, funding, resources and administration were configured differently at each of Education Queensland's five trial sites. As will be explained the agency of staff at each site was an important factor in the level of success of these five trial alternative centres.

Structures and mechanisms which the TAFE Youth At Risk Program model drew on were TAFE administrative structures, approaches and curricula, as well as the unique teaching

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<sup>21</sup> Bhaskar, *Reflections on Meta-Reality*, p. 65.

<sup>22</sup> R. Grunsell, *Beyond Control? Schools and Suspension*, London: Writers and Readers in association with Chameleon, 1980; J. Normington, 'Exclusion: The Role of Outside Agencies,' in E. Blyth and J. Milner ed., *Exclusion from School - Inter-Professional Issues for Policy and Practice*, London & New York: Routledge, 1996; L. Mitchell, 'The Effects of Waiting Time on Excluded Children,' in E. Blyth and J. Milner ed., *Exclusion from School - Inter-Professional Issues for Policy and Practice*, London & New York: Routledge, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> Normington, 'Exclusion: The Role of Outside Agencies,' ed; M. Stephenson, 'Cities in Schools,' in E. Blyth and J. Milner ed., *Exclusion from School - Inter-Professional Issues for Policy and Practice*, London & New York.: Routledge, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> E. Currie, 'Alternative Program Helps at-Risk Pupils,' *Education Views*, vol. 3, no. 7, 2000, April.

practices developed at the Senior Community College [which later became a TAFE] where the program was located. This model was *an emergent schooling structure* as its various teaching mechanisms were combined and modified to varying degrees to suit its specific cohort of at risk students. In doing so it became not an essential component of TAFE but a contingent component, dependent on its specific student cohort. The program's core curriculum 'Certificate I in Workplace Access', a TAFE program remained the same but additional 'Literacy' and 'Personal Development' components were specifically developed to meet the needs of disengaged youth. Additionally existent teaching practices were modified by staff from the literacy unit, who were responsible for the overall direction of the program. This modified approach allowed for greater agency on the part of both individual staff and at risk students: more student input, more student support and care, and flexibility in teacher approaches.

However, more powerful inherent mechanisms of the wider TAFE structure constricted agency of literacy staff and at risk students. In their interviews literacy staff expressed concerns that their specialized teaching approach for youth at risk was not being implemented across the program, particularly in the vocational units, and that there was a 'dispirit approach' to teaching which was confusing for their students. It could therefore be postulated that the close relationship with TAFE/schooling structures and mechanisms caused the program to be relatively enduring, over 12 years, even when the senior college which generated the program changed to become a TAFE campus. However the misalignment with TAFE structures and mechanisms, the Youth At Risk Program being just a contingent TAFE structure could also be part of a possible explanation why in 2007 the program was suspended.

Thus the *causal power* of 'prior schooling structures' was embodied in the way their essential *mechanisms triggered* a reaction in certain *individuals*, which resulted in a decision to establish a specific *form of alternative schooling* for youth at risk. But it was the inherent power within either the current social structures or the individual agents which *determined* how each model became a *further emergent schooling structure* as it continued to develop and transform.

### 2.3 'Purpose' linked to 'Necessary Relations with Organisations' and 'Individual Agency'

To further determine the importance of the three final historical causal components, transcendental questions were again asked about the 'Purpose', 'Necessary Relations with Organisations' and 'Individual Agency'. As above, questions were likewise tailored to uncover the unique components of each alternative schooling site. Apart from being triggered by schooling structures that pre-dated the school, each model of alternative schooling was tied implicitly to its 'purpose'. The continuance and success of each school greatly depended on the 'agency' of staff and/or parents in fulfilling that purpose. Essential to staff/parents' agency was the strength of their links or 'relations with contextual organisations.' Impinging on staff/parent agency were the constraining or power<sub>2</sub> relations<sup>25</sup> of linked educational organisations when there was a misalignment of purposes.

For staff at the Alternative Education Centre their perceived central purpose was *to develop a one on one relationship with their students*. A (stated?) mechanism for doing achieving this was applying to apply the Glasser philosophy<sup>26</sup> to help fulfil students' emotional needs, the latter being a causal component central to the embodied personalities of at risk students. As one of two coordinators, Mrs T put it, 'Behind that behaviour is a damaged unhappy little person ... And you go back to

<sup>25</sup> Hartwig, 'Agency,' ed.

<sup>26</sup> William Glasser, *Choice Theory in the Classroom*, New York: Quill, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 2001; ———, *Every Student Can Succeed*, Chatsworth, California: Black Forest Press, 2000.

the Glasser, and I'm more convinced than ever that the only thing I can work with, with this kid is the one on one relationship.<sup>27</sup> So although there was a slight disjunction of core purposes with their sponsoring organisation, Education Queensland), this staff's purposes and teaching practices fulfilled the core objective of Education Queensland that of *providing a learning venue for disruptive students*. That students attended, their behavioural problems were greatly mitigated and some learning took place, fitted well within the state schooling authority's stated parameters. Further enhancing the school's functioning was the combined agency of the two coordinators, who tapped into their personal and professional schooling networks. As individuals this couple's agency depended on both external and internal factors; their 25 year relationships built with students, parents and schooling personnel, and their dispositional qualities of personality and wide and varied teaching experiences and skills developed. Because of their agency Mr and Mrs T were able to fully utilize schooling structures for the continuation and benefit of their alternative school.

Personal agency of the original parent committee and staff at the Flexi School tied to its purpose *to be 'different'* was also important for its continuance. Their agency was an exemplification of activated causal factors inherent in both their personal and rural networks. It was dependent on: their personal abilities of being able to liaise with community members and organisations, and being well known and liked in the town; and also on rural networks formed through their various social roles within the town. Apart from a constant battle to maintain 'difference', crucial for the ongoing operation of the Flexi School were its links with the town's community and service organisations. It was through these links that essential accommodation and funding were obtained.

However, the Flexi School parents found their agency was restricted by the linked Education Queensland schooling structure, the local high school. They disagreed with what they perceived as an 'officious' approach or ethos of the linked local high school. Unlike the Alternative Education Centre coordinators, Flexi parents were not embedded and accepted within this schooling structure. As outsiders they did not have sufficient personal and networking agency to effect change in the approach of the linked high school, whose increasing influence they saw as negatively impinging on their school – derailing its entire *raison d'être*, to be 'different'. When external insurance factors caused them to lose accommodation in the local scout building, they were subsequently unable to secure needed funding and accommodation. The parent committee was disempowered and disbanded. They handed over the full administrative responsibility of their alternative school to the local high school. They had been 'de-agentified by the machinery of power<sub>2</sub> relations.'<sup>28</sup>

Also disempowered was the Flexi's para teacher [or teacher's aide] who had also been part of the parent committee. The para teacher was a founding staff member who apart from teaching and administrative duties had provided housing for some of the Flexi's homeless students. She had been described by the original coordinator as the students' 'earth mother'. However at the time of interview she expressed the belief 'that people don't have respect for me, because I'm supposedly only a teacher aide.'<sup>29</sup> Also 'de-agentified' she resigned during the research. The two remaining teaching staff, a new coordinator and a long term class teacher both had sufficient agency to maintain negotiations with the local community and local high school, so that the Flexi School to continued to operate. However, although the Flexi School continues with staff

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<sup>27</sup> Author, Interview with Alternative Education Centre's 2 Coordinators, Brisbane, 13 September 2004, 22.46, 60.00 mins.

<sup>28</sup> Hartwig, 'Agency,' ed., p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Autor, Interview with Flexi School's para teacher, Brisbane, 8 September 2004, 50.30 mins.

claiming an overt preference for a 'different' approach, there nevertheless has begun a gradual alignment with the more formal administrative processes of the more powerful linked mainstream schooling structure; processes or mechanisms which originally caused at risk students to disengage.

Thus at two alternative sites, the Flexi School and the Alternative Education Centre - essential to staff/parents' agency to implement their desired purpose was the strength of individual links or relations with contextual organisations. Successful agency of individuals resulted from the *power [power] of activated internal and external personal mechanisms*: internal dispositions and external networks. It was the continuing ability of individuals to access their contextual networks which permitted transformative action and agency. This was in spite of the fact that individual agency at the two sites was tied to different networks or social relationships: a rural/personal network and an organisational/professional/ personal network. Impinging on staff/parent agency were *power<sub>2</sub> relations*<sup>30</sup> of linked educational organisations, particularly when there was a misalignment of purposes.

For TAFE's Youth At Risk Program the core purpose had been 'to fulfil a community need', the need to reengaged students who had dropped out of school but who wanted to re-enter and complete Year 11 and 12 at the Senior Community College and gain employable skills. Literacy staff interviewed had related a subsidiary purpose: *to build student confidence and resilience*. The latter was built into their teaching practices as noted above. As the Community College where the program was originally embedded changed its structure, and came under the auspices of TAFE, the purpose for the program remained the same, with *employable skills and a Year 10 equivalent certificate* remaining the goal. However the student cohort expanded from those in the local area wanting to enter this particular Senior College, to at risk students from across the entire metropolitan area. TAFE networks were used by the program coordinator and administrative personnel to promote the program, contacting high school principals, the media and local businesses. However individual agency of those staff members spearheading the program was constrained within the TAFE organisational structure. As a result the literacy/personal development staff's individual agency only seemed to have a significant bearing on teaching practices within their unit, impacting the literacy and personal development components of the course.

So unlike the Alternative Education Centre, also part of a larger educational structure, the Youth At Risk Program was *constrained by more powerful structures and mechanisms within the larger TAFE system*, particularly the vocational education sector with its expectations of responsible, self directed, adult learner behaviour. As perceived by staff this sector was not open to alternative approaches to facilitate engagement and learning for youth at risk. TAFE's structures and mechanisms with discrete and separately housed vocational units prevented staff/staff relations and staff/organisational relations essential for the Youth At Risk Program. Despite the program enduring for 12 years, when school based vocational programs and other alternative programs for youth at risk became available in the area, administrators at the TAFE decided to suspend the Youth At Risk Program. Involved staff did not have the agency to prevent this suspension.

The difference between the research's two larger education bodies was that compared to the TAFE sector, Education Queensland was structured to allowed for localized administration and more autonomy for teacher developed curricula and teaching practices. Whereas the TAFE sector was structured into discrete vocational units with strict outcomes based curriculum packages. Hence for coordinators at the Education Queensland sponsored alternative school,

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<sup>30</sup> Hartwig, 'Agency,' ed.

their *agency to promote a specific purpose* for their centre ‘to develop a one on one relationship with their students through the Glasser philosophy’ was *enabled*, while for the staff of TAFE’s alternative program their agency ‘to build student confidence and resilience through flexible teaching practices’ was *blocked*.

### 3 Conclusion-Explanation of Historical Transcendental Question

*What were the necessary conditions that brought each alternative schooling site into being, and made its continued existence possible?*

To answer this historical overarching or transcendental question regarding establishment and continuance of three alternative schools, we must return to Sayer’s<sup>31</sup> modified version of the Critical Social Scientific research process of uncovering: problematic events or phenomena, source, negative judgement, source removal, and contingent outcomes, embedded within Danermark et al.’s<sup>32</sup> methodological framework. In doing so the following *tendencies* where ‘causal powers were exercised or set in motion’<sup>33</sup> became evident:

Across the three alternative case study sites there were a related number of problematic social phenomena or *events* and allied *sources*, which resulted in their establishment and continuance. At all sites, the initiating or ‘generative event’ was a decision taken by various individuals (parents, college administrators, state education personnel) that certain young people required alternative schooling provisions. The source or trigger for this decision was the impact on these individuals of young people ‘not being able to handle’ mainstream schooling, and conversely of mainstream schooling not being able to handle this group of young people labelled ‘at risk’. However the initiating event and causal at risk group occurred within an interrelated laminated system. Within the system of each case study site the *structures and mechanisms* of both *individuals and organisations* variously affected each other *according to their inherent powers*.

A precursor to the ‘generative event’ were the ‘prior schooling structures’ whose causal powers consisted in two instances [Flexi School and TAFE Youth At Risk Program] of *an absence* of responsive teaching and administrative practices, that is practices that responded to the individual needs of at risk students. This lack created a negative reaction and desire for something ‘different’. The causal powers in the third instance [Alternative Education Centre] were created by a *presence* of positive ideas, concepts and discourses about the need to absent social barriers to student engagement. These positive mechanisms of the Alternative Education Centre’s prior schooling structure, which addressed absenting the negative, also created a desire for different teaching and administrative practices. So it could be said that there was a tendency for the *power of ‘prior schooling’s’ structures and mechanisms* to create a desire in some individuals to establish a form of schooling which *absented schooling practices judged to be negative* for a disengaged cohort of students.

As individuals strove to *remove the source* for student disengagement and chose ‘alternative schooling models’, further tendential statements could be made about the choice and development of those models. When individuals or groups of individuals chose ‘alternative schooling models’ the causal factors triggering their choice were that *each model had structures/mechanisms* which were *aligned asymmetrically with program initiators’ structures/mechanisms*. For

<sup>31</sup> Sayer, *Realism and Social Science*, p. 159.

<sup>32</sup> Danermark et al., *Explaining Society - Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*.

<sup>33</sup> Brian Pinkstone, ‘Tendency,’ in Mervyn Hartwig ed., *Dictionary of Critical Realism*, London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2007, p. 458.

example, the initiating parents chose a model that allowed for a parent committee or parent administrative oversight with minimal input from the linked local high school; the government education department personnel chose a similar model in operation in government schools in the United Kingdom; and personnel from the Senior College come TAFE chose a TAFE vocational program combined with a TAFE literacy curriculum. Once chosen each model *became an emergent structural form* as it differed from its original structure. The structural modifications were *dependent on inherent power within* either contextual social structures or individual agents.

Additionally the power to either transform or maintain emergent alternative models structures and mechanisms *stemmed from the power* of individuals and/or contextual educational organisations to *implement their desired 'purpose'*. The causal factors involved in implementing these 'purposes' depended on: firstly, alignment of purposes of individuals and linked educational structures, whether purposes were externally or internally [contingent or necessary] related to linked educational structures;<sup>34</sup> and secondly, the 'individual agency' [power<sub>1</sub>] of initiating individuals and the power of contextual educational structures [power<sub>2</sub>]. For example the TAFE Youth at Risk Program was eventually disbanded as a contingent rather than an integral or necessary component of the larger schooling structure. Initiating literacy staff had had sufficient agency to implement 'different' or emergent teaching practices within their unit, however they did not have sufficient agency to change embedded teaching practices and expectations, mechanisms of the larger TAFE structure.

Moreover it could be said that in attempting to remove the source for student disengagement and provide alternative forms of schooling, in the historical context, contingent implications emerged. Thus there was a tendency when causal powers were activated for each of the historical components, for a judgement to be made at either the individual or social structural level. This was a judgement on the need to remove/supply essential mechanisms and structures with implicit or explicit 'ought to' statements deriving from 'is', 'ceteris paribus'<sup>35</sup> that is based on the concrete context of what already existed all things considered. Remediating actions resulting from these judgements took place according to the strength of individual or structural power. If educational structures were more powerful than individuals, it was necessary for individual purposes to be aligned with the educational purposes of the structures to which they were linked. When power<sub>2</sub> relations of such contextual organisations prevented power<sub>1</sub> agency of individuals to implement what they perceived as needed emancipatory teaching practices and programs, remediating action was constrained or prevented. Posited emancipatory practices and programs were constrained or discontinued.

Discovering whether posited emancipatory practices and programs at case study sites were in fact emancipatory, and whether the judgements made and remediating actions taken were effective, that is *what were other possible implications* of alternative schooling programs for youth at risk was the basis for the doctoral study's further two explanatory critiques and outside the scope of this article. These two critiques further explored Sayer's<sup>36</sup> final suggested stage for critical social science research and led to a deeper understanding of the causal powers constraining and enabling emancipatory practices at three alternative schooling sites in Queensland, Australia.

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<sup>34</sup> Danermark et al., *Explaining Society - Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*.

<sup>35</sup> Sayer, *Realism and Social Science*.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

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