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Characteristics of effective practice with 'at risk' youth – a comparative analysis of alternative education and early intervention into youth homelessness

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ABSTRACT
*Young people seen "at risk" are a substantial focus across a wide range of policy and practice fields. This paper compares insights generated from research in two such fields, alternative education and early intervention into youth homelessness, in an effort to **distil key meta-characteristics** for effective practice.*

*Intervention strategies need to intertwine the **individual and relational** within an **institutional context** which allows for and supports a collaborative, flexible, exploratory and responsive approach by front line staff. The fine grained lived experience of each young person requires recognition for this to occur, as well as attention to fostering supportive relationships at a number of levels: with young people, and between young people and significant others including peers, parents/ family, other services and community.*

In the context of schooling, this is a "different" approach to the technicist and functional approach of many mainstream schooling organisations; "different" to a mainstream approach which focuses on the product not the person, and utilises pre-determined intervention approaches. In the context of human services for young people this points to a nuanced approach, to "person in environment" practice, particularly in locations where policy and institutional priorities translate into narrow constructions of outcomes or methods.

Introduction

The engagement and re-engagement of young people in the core institutions of education, vocational training, employment and family have been key concerns in many national contexts over the past thirty years. In economies underpinned by neo-liberal perspectives this interest has intensified as education and training participation for young people has become more tightly linked to both longer term wellbeing (reduced costs to government for social support) and national economic productivity goals. Various fields of policy and practice have developed responses to those young people seen most "at risk" of being unable to participate in mainstream economic and social life.

The education field has been particularly interested in preventing early school leaving, and more recently in enhancing literacy and numeracy. Various school based and school focused interventions have been developed to support "at risk" young people remain in schooling (Brooks et al 1997), including the development of various forms of alternative (to mainstream) education.

Rather than operating in relative isolation education provision and human service support has become more closely associated, at times integrated. These dual goals of increasing core skills for those students falling below accepted standards and maintaining connection in schools as a protective factor against various social problems can in various contexts be seen operating in concert or in tension to varying degrees.

An array of studies have examined aspects of practice with young people seen to be "at risk", and it is striking the extent to which what is supported by evidence as good practice, in respect of young people at risk in one field (literacy and numeracy) resonates with that of an associated field (early intervention into youth homelessness). We suggest that it is of benefit to compare findings about good practice across the two fields, and that in so doing we may be better able to suggest critical shared characteristics for good practice.

Alternative school teaching as a field of practice
Insights regarding at risk young people in education are distilled from a doctoral study examining literacy and social practices at three alternative forms of schooling in Queensland Australia (Livock, 2010). These were intended as places which made it possible for young people, previously disenchanted and disengaged from the mainstream schooling system, to reengage and gain the necessary skills, skills both academic and social, which would allow them to become viable members of their communities. Although each alternative school followed a different model, each school was successful to the extent an approach that allowed their students to "flourish" was implemented. This was a "different" approach in that it accepted the different identities of young people labelled "at risk", and continued to practice inclusiveness, even in times of crisis. It was an approach which focussed on building stable, trusting relationships with not only these young people, but also connected with parents and carers. It was an approach that acknowledged the role of care givers and afforded them agency, where in the past they had often been pariahs, also disengaged from the schooling system.

The catalyst for bringing each alternative school into being was a need for something "different", "different" to mainstream schooling for students labelled "at risk", where risk was located in educational, personal, social cultural and community spheres, such as being at risk of leaving school early, at risk of unemployment, at risk of homelessness, poverty, health issues. "Different" was a key reoccurring word that emerged when interviewing staff across all three schools. When questioned why their alternative school had started, all interviewees had responded that the alternative student cohort had needed something "different", not something different in educational content but different in *how* it was taught, and different *in the way* the institution interfaced with students; that is different in both pedagogic and institutional practices.

Further analysis of both staff and student narratives revealed problematic sources which in the mainstream context had blocked student agency resulting in disengagement. The problems identified in mainstream schooling for at risk students were in the academic (focussing on literacy teaching and learning), affective and administrative domains:

> i) *Academic domain:* disengagement and disinterest within the classroom, and for many failure to learn basic functional literacy skills;

> ii) A*ffective domain:* failure included inability to make friendships, being subject to severe bullying, demonstrated aggression to other students, compliancy with friends who encouraged truancy and disengaging behaviours;

iii) *Administrative domain:* resistance to a rigid timetabled-rule-task based focus that was discordant with their lived experience; irregularity factors in this area included truancy, dropout, movement from school to school, or attendance at an alternative school on advice of the principal (Livock 2009, p.260).

The different approach of the alternative schools remedied these problems in the three domains in the following ways:

i) *Academic pedagogies that included* one-to-one teacher assistance, provided until understanding was realized; encouragement for students to assist each other; student directed curricula; second chances to achieve outcomes; real-life tasks; and direct teaching of specific functional literacy skills;

ii) *In the affective domain,* teachers taught and modelled how to use verbal negotiating/ communicating skills; how to accept different points of view and support the building of positive friendships that encourage engagement;

iii) *Administratively,* a student focused needs-based approach was implemented, in addition to administrative support for teachers as they designed and implemented this alternative or 'different' approach (Livock 2009, p.261).

Thus in the academic realm, the pedagogies or teaching practices enacted were not only student centred, but *individually* centred on each at risk student, as opposed to a one size fits all approach of a mainstream classroom. Of the mainstream classroom approach one student commented, "It's like they're not interested if you learn at all. It's whether they give you all the information or not" (Flexi School, Student 4, 8/9/04, 10.11 mins). Other students explained how individualized teaching at their alternative school helped them learn:

> *Female Student:* I think it's because I get more help here. And I'm more myself. **When at school, I'd ask for help and they just wouldn't help me as much as what I needed.** And it'd just be just like, "I've wrote the question on the board, look at it read it, do it". But here the teacher would be like, "well if you don't understand it …" – they'll tell us a different way to understand it, **until we understand the question** or whatever we are doing (Suburban TAFE, Student 1, 10/9/04, 8.00 mins; emphasis author's).

Of note: these were individualized teaching practices which continued until there was a resolution, a positive resolution – the student grasped the learning concept, as opposed to the previous practice at the mainstream schools where the students were often left to solve the problem themselves. However, it is also important to add that for individualized attention to occur there needs to be a high ratio of adults to young people and this needs to be factored into institutional budgets. In the doctoral study there was a consensus by staff across all three alternative schools that with such high needs students, particularly when the risk factors in their lives were increased, even ten students to one adult could be too many. For institutions to maintain this high adult/young person ratio was a way positive support could be given to both staff and students in the administrative domain. This was one way the administrative domain could positively influence the continued engagement of youth at risk.

In the affective domain, also important in reengaging at risk youth was the fine grained acknowledgement of each young person's lived experience. The acknowledgment of such a student's lived experience was exemplified by how the Flexi School assisted one student, Nicole

(pseudonym) aged 16, who in the year of the interview had reported moving home seven or eight times. In doing so she had lost most of her Brisbane Distance Education workbooks; however, because the Flexi School constantly liaised with teachers at the Brisbane School of Distance Education, and also took on the responsibility of obtaining needed workbooks and then posting back completed books, students such as Nicole with fluid living arrangements could rely on the consistent support of their alternative school to help them complete their academic tasks. Consequently for Nicole who in 2004 in the process of moving so many times had lost many of her workbooks, nevertheless by the year's end had managed to "submit 17 pieces of work" (End of Year Report Card, 2004) and would be completing her Year 10 course at the beginning of 2005. At this case study site the Para Teacher commented on the importance of this trusting relationship:

> I think the most effective part is that we exist. That we are here. And we have like the old kids come back. Just the fact that one, we exist. Two, *that we're approachable and that they trust us, generally I think. We've built relationships with them, and its just long term relationships.* Because they leave, they go off into the world and they come back. It's a sense of a centre for them I think. It centres them (Flexi para teacher interview, 8/9/04, 34.50 mins; emphasis author's).

The Flexi School para teacher further explained how the school had become a town resource assisting young people with general life skills, such as filling in Centrelink (Australian Federal Government social security department) forms, rental applications or faxing. Thus in the affective domain it was important for alternative schools to have a reputation of a trusted, reliable support mechanism for young people whose lives were often out of control and without consistency. When this trusting relationship broke down young people felt betrayed, and disengaged.

Additionally in the affective domain for staff to remain positively engaged with at risk young people, they too need the encouragement of a supportive institutional environment. In the doctoral study, staff across all sites commented on the effort they had to expend keeping easily distracted or hard to motivate students engaged. Linked to this was the counselling role teachers performed, where students were not willing to talk to "official" institutional counsellors, but rather went to their lead teacher about personal problems. This often placed considerable emotional strain on lead teachers. The emotional strain was compounded when teachers had to take on several teaching responsibilities with depleted staff numbers.

Early intervention into youth homelessness as a field of practice with at risk young people
These findings from Livock's doctoral study have also been borne out in the area of human services. In this arena successive Australian governments since the early 1990's have supported early intervention into youth homelessness. Between 1996 and 1998 the *Youth Homelessness Pilot Program* (YHPP) involving 26 non-government delivered services, developed a framework for early intervention from an extensive evaluation and action research strategy. The framework developed was used to expand the pilot program into what is now called *Reconnect*, in 2010 comprised of 114 services nationally. A unique characteristic of the program logic has been the requirement for all funded services to undertake action research in an ongoing way as a mechanism for developing context responsive services.

Reconnect uses family focussed early intervention strategies to help the young person who is recently or "at risk" of becoming homeless, "achieve family reconciliation and an improved level of engagement with work, education, training and the community" (Australian Government, Dept. of

FaHCSIA, 2010). Schools are considered a key "first to know" agency (Crane & Brannock, 1996) and thus an important venue for delivery of early intervention.

Data regarding the framework for early intervention practice is derived from two comprehensive national evaluations which were conducted in 1998 (ARTD 1998) and 2003 (Ryan 2003), a number of specific commissioned research studies (RPR Consulting, 2003; Evans & Shaver, 2001), a process to derive good practice principles (RPR Consulting, 1998), and the systematic analysis of action research reports from services over the period 1998 to 2009 by various consultants (Parker 2000, Porter Orchard various, and ARTD 2009, cited in Crane & O'Regan, 2010). Both national evaluations found that the early intervention undertaken was successful in improving the stability in the young person's living situation, and in achieving family reconciliation broadly defined (ARTD, 1998; Ryan, 2003).

The above studies contributed to and confirmed the evidence base for and articulation of good practice. Good practices for early intervention into youth homelessness to emerge include meeting the immediate needs of clients; responding quickly when assistance is sought; explicitly involving the young persons' supports - most importantly family; having a "toolbox" of intervention strategies that allow for client-driven, flexible, "holistic" and collaborative responses; using language and approaches which are seen as supportive to client young people and their families; delivering direct services to young people whilst simultaneously working to build community capacity to provide positive support (for example, a more supportive school environment); and service providers using action research to systematically investigate strategies for effective practice.   After more than a decade of sustained use and reflection the *Reconnect* good practice principles (RPR Consulting 1998; Ryan, 2003, pp.23-24) provide the glue for early intervention practice across diverse contexts that range from the inner city to remote indigenous communities.

Rather than identifying one or more specific models of service which are then "scaled up" the experience of these early intervention programmes is that a wide range of specific service delivery approaches can be effective in achieving the goal of increased connection of young people to family, education, work and community. What is critical is a deliberate pursuit of good practice within and across services, and the ongoing development and use of good practice principles derived from a variety of data sources.

Recent research into case management practice provides further support for there being several key characteristics to effective practice with young people who are disengaged or disengaging from key social systems. In a systematic review of evidence (53 studies) Gronda found that case management works when the relationship between the worker and the client is typified by persistence, reliability, intimacy and respect, and delivers comprehensive, practical support (2009, p.9). These qualities were significant across various client categories, including young people, regardless of the particular case management model utilised.

Key meta-characteristics for effective practice with young people at risk of disengagement from education, family and/or community
Providing early intervention support to young people at risk of homelessness from a non-government agency and providing literacy support to young people in sites of alternative education seem on the face of it to be very different contexts. Different in terms of the issue of primary focus, the institutional location, the worker role and the discipline base. What struck us however was how research into practice in the two fields resonated with each other. In some senses

this should not surprise as the cohorts of young people overlap. Difficulty in remaining at school has been found to be positively associated with youth homelessness (MacKenzie and Chamberlain 1995).

There are important reasons to encourage linkages between education providers and human services, in part arising from the need for substantial linkages between practitioners in the two fields in order to respond adequately to complexity of need and institutional location. Livock's study reinforces the point that educational goals cannot be progressed without attention to the affective domain.   Positive engagement in education is an important protective factor against youth homelessness.

What emerges is a clear overlap between characteristics of good practice in the alternative education and youth homelessness fields of practice. Appreciating these has the potential to provide a common ground for practice with young people variously considered "at risk". The necessity and desirability of networked support for young people suggests this is an important project. Derived from our view of the data from various studies mentioned we suggest that good practice with young people is:
- Person-centred
- Inclusive of natural networks
- Responsive and flexible
- Inquiry oriented
- Institutionally supported.

Person-centred
Livock identified individuation, a fine grained attention to each young person's lived experience, as a key requirement for the sustained engagement of young people in alternative education settings. In such a person-centred approach the building of trust and relationship provides the foundation for moving towards institutionally sanctioned outcomes. A person-centered approach provides the practitioner with an opportunity to locate the young person in their broader contexts, to appreciate something of the complexity and unique texture of their everyday world, and provides the young person with evidence that they have standing as a person rather than as a educational or (in the case of youth homelessness practice) a family commodity. An ecological perspective linked with a strengths based approach to assessment and intervention are well trodden frameworks in social work and behavioural sciences (Payne, 2005). These variously emphasise the development of interventions which encourage holistic understandings and individual agency.

Inclusive of natural networks
In both fields an inclusive approach to young people's families (and other sources of social support) is important. Family, broadly defined, is a critical source of support for young people of school age, given the extended period of economic and social dependency on families that has come to typify young people's pathways to full-time adult wage employment.

The inclusion of natural networks of support in a respectful way is an important for appreciating a person's lived experience and activating support that has long term meaningfulness and sustainability. Whilst the context of alternative education is less oriented to engagement with natural networks, the capacity of these to assist or undermine educational effort is identified in Livock's study, and supported by other evidence (Levitas, 2005; Mitchell, 2000; Australian Industry Group & Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2007; The National Youth Commission, 2008)).

Responsive and flexible

The need for a flexible context responsive approach to practice is indicated in both fields. The pursuit of individual outcomes rather than adherence to pre-conceived models of service is necessary in order to match intervention to a particular young person. Instead of utilizing pre-conceived models, applying the notion of a "toolbox approach" facilitates greater flexibility and responsiveness. A toolbox approach allows a suite of well founded intervention strategies to be identified and sanctioned organisationally, whilst providing sufficient room for flexibly responding to client needs at a particular point in time and process. Effective practice can also have creative and micro-political management elements as it may need to go outside the dominant model of service and institutional habits. Working with "at risk" young people should therefore provide some additional scope for practitioners to develop "customised" responses given the complexities these young people are seen to present.

Front line practitioners in both the alternative education and human services spheres are role based rather than role bound. They tend to see their role as a platform for providing important services and support and are willing to interpret their mandate broadly rather than narrowly in the pursuit of outcomes they are employed to work towards. This view is reflected in Livock's (2009) recorded alternative education staff's interview comments, and in literature surrounding alternative education going back as far as the 1970s (Grunsell,1980; Mitchell,1996; Normington,1996; Stephenson,1996). Front line practitioners facilitate opportunities and support, and don't use their role as an excuse not to engage. Gronda (2009, p.12) found that for clients direct service delivery by the worker is generally preferable to brokerage or referral. This involves the practitioner working at the intersection of their role with others (perhaps in multi-disciplinary teams), being able to comprehensively assess needs, and being able to respond directly to a broad range of needs (Gronda, 2009, p.12).   More broadly "joined-up" serviced delivery that links a suite of service resources together is of substantial current interest in various social policy arenas (The National Youth Commission, 2008, pp.370-372).

Inquiry oriented

Effective early intervention services are characterised by active and explicit reflective processes to consider what is effective and how service delivery can be improved or be more responsive to presented needs (Crane & Brannock, 1996). Various terminologies exist to describe such a character including reflective practice, action research, action learning and continuous improvement (Crane & O'Regan, 2010). Tools for inquiry allow a worker, service or program to link observations, feedback and data to both individual and service level change. Models of service are understood as dynamic and context responsive rather than static.

Institutionally supported

Enabling system and institutional conditions are important. In particular time is important for relationship formation and maintenance (Gronda 2009: 12). Livock found that alternative education teachers demonstrated a capacity to continue working with a young person until there was a resolution or natural conclusion, and remained open to re-engagement. This has also been evident in early intervention into youth homelessness practice. The issue of having sufficient time is often reflective of a combination of institutional requirements for example class size/required caseload, and case complexity.

Conclusion

This paper therefore concludes that there is an identifiable overlap between characteristics of good practice in the fields of alternative education and early intervention into youth homelessness practice. There is evidence to suggest that young people "at risk" are most likely to be assisted when the approach to front-line practice is person-centered, inclusive of natural networks, responsive and flexible, inquiry oriented and institutionally supported. Well-founded good practice characteristics that are shared across fields bring additional opportunities to realise positive outcomes and clarity in front-line practice with young people considered "at risk".

Key Words

Alternative education, youth at risk, youth homelessness, reconnect program, person-centred, responsive and flexible, natural networks, inquiry oriented, institutional support

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