

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

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Engagement / re-engagement of at risk youth

- *Concern of core institutions* of education, vocational training, employment and family;
- *Linked to* longer term wellbeing, and national economic productivity goals;

- Education:
 - ❖ preventing early school leaving
 - ❖ enhancing literacy and numeracy

 - ❖ ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

- Human Services:
 - ❖ protective factors against various social problems

 - ❖ EARLY INTERVENTION INTO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

FIELD OF PRACTICE – ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL TEACHING

A “different” approach that ...

- Accepted “different” identities of youth at risk,
- Continued to practice inclusiveness, even in times of crisis,
- Focussed on building stable, trusting relationships with:
 - these young people,
 - with parents and carers,
- Acknowledged the role of care givers & afforded them agency:
 - in the past they had often been pariahs, also disengaged from the schooling system.

Mainstream schooling – sources blocking student agency

i. Academic domain

- in the classroom: disengagement and disinterest,
- for individuals: failure to learn basic functional literacy skills.

ii. Affective domain:

- inability to make friendships,
- being subject to severe bullying,
- demonstrated aggression to other students,
- friends who encouraged truancy/disengaging behaviours.

iii. Administrative domain:

- a rigid *timetabled/rule/task** based focus, *technicist & functional (Lingard, Hayes & Mills 2003)
- this focus discordant with lived experience,
- irregularity factors: truancy, dropout, movement from school to school.

Teaching at mainstream schooling ...

Flexi School, Student 4: It's like they're not interested if you learn at all. It's whether they give you all the information or not (8/9/04, 10.11 mins).

Suburban TAFE, Student 1: 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 (10/9/04, 8.00 mins).

Alternative schools – “different” approach enabling student agency

i. Academic pedagogies included:

- one-to-one teacher assistance,
- instruction provided until understanding realized,
- encouragement for students to assist each other,
- student directed curricula,
- second chances to achieve outcomes,
- real-life tasks,
- direct teaching of functional literacy skills.

ii. Affective domain:

- teachers taught and modelled:
- how to use verbal negotiating/communicating skills,
- how to accept different points of view
- skills to build positive friendships that encouraged engagement.

iii. Administrative domain:

- a student focused needs-based approach,
- administrative support for teachers ... as they designed and implemented this alternative or ‘different’ approach.

FIELD OF PRACTICE – EARLY INTERVENTION INTO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

1. **Since 1996 early intervention services** for young people recently homeless or at risk of homelessness have been funded, through a program called ***Reconnect***
2. **Good practices identified through** evaluations, commissioned research and action research over 14 years:
 - i. *meeting the immediate needs* of clients,
 - ii. *responding quickly* when assistance is sought,
 - iii. *explicitly involving the young persons' supports* - most importantly family,
 - iv. *having a “toolbox” of intervention strategies* that allow for client-driven, flexible, “holistic” and collaborative responses,
 - v. *using language and approaches* which are seen as supportive to client young people and their families,
 - vi. *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
 - vii. *service providers using action research* to systematically investigate strategies for effective practice.

KEY META-CHARACTERISTICS

Effective practice for young people at risk of disengagement from education, family, community is ...

1. Person-centred
2. Inclusive of natural networks
3. Responsive and flexible
4. Inquiry oriented
5. **Institutionally supported**

Person-centred

- i. Individuation*, a fine grained attention to each young person's lived experience, places their situation at the centre of practice.
- ii. The building of trust and relationships* provides the foundation for moving towards specific outcomes.
- iii. Locates the young person in their broader contexts*, to appreciate something of the complexity and unique texture of their everyday world.
- iv.* Provides the young person with evidence that they have *standing as a person*.
- v. An ecological and strengths based* perspective which encourage holistic understandings and individual agency.

Inclusive of natural networks

- i. Natural networks include* young people's families, broadly defined, and other sources of social support.
- ii. 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.
- iii.* There is substantial evidence that natural networks are *influential in providing support* for young people or undermining effort.

Responsive and flexible

- i.* **The pursuit of personal outcomes rather** than adherence to pre-conceived models of service.
- ii.* Use of a “toolbox” of well founded strategies facilitates **greater flexibility and responsiveness.**
- iii.* **Need to be creative** and manage micro-political environment.
- iv.* **Practitioners develop “customised” responses** given the complexities these young people are seen to present.
- v.* Practitioners **facilitate opportunities** and support.
- vi.* And are **role based** rather than role bound.

Inquiry oriented

- i. Models of service are understood as ***dynamic and context responsive*** rather than static.
- ii. ***Active and explicit inquiry processes*** to consider what is effective and how service delivery can be more responsive and achieve outcomes.
- iii. There are a ***variety of process tools*** for inquiry that allow a worker, service or program to link observations, feedback and data to both individual and service level change e.g. *action research, action learning and continuous improvement.*

Institutionally supported

- i.* **Enabling** system and institutional **conditions** are important.
- ii.* **Sufficient time** is important for relationship formation and maintenance -
 - the capacity to continue working with a young person until there is a resolution or natural conclusion, and
 - remaining open to re-engagement.
- iii.* **Insufficient time** often a result of the combined effect of *institutional requirements* ...
 - eg class size/ required caseload,
and *case complexity*.

CONCLUSION

- 1. 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 practice fields bring additional opportunities to realise positive outcomes and clarity** in front-line practice with young people considered “at risk”.

Thank you



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