

Early Intervention Education Strategies for At-Risk Students: What Is Best Practice?

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INTRODUCTION

A central problem for the Australian welfare and child protection systems is its educational provision for the children of compulsory school age who are in care. As such, it involves both the education and the welfare sectors. How educators face up to this problem is one consideration. How our welfare system responds is another.

St Vincent's is a small, specialised school in South Melbourne which puts a magnifying glass to the way in which these two systems interact. All students and clients of St. Vincent's are or have been under the scrutiny of the Department of Human Services. Some of these young people have been removed from their family (residential students) and others are living in supported accommodation or, in a minority of cases, with their family or relatives (day students). The very difficult life circumstances of these young people presents a 'welfare priority' along with layers of child protection issues, and this must also contend with the educational imperative to provide education to these young people who are still of compulsory school age, but are to all intents and purposes beyond the reaches of the conventional system.

Australian families in receipt of Human Services are by definition a troubled group. Some of the children of these families are at risk of exclusion from mainstream school, or are already excluded - perhaps permanently. A wide ranging audit of Victoria's child protection systems conducted in 1996 by the Victorian auditor-general, Mr. Ches Baragwanath, concluded the following:

'Unfortunately, for a proportion of children in State care, their school attendance is characterised by truancy, refusal to attend school, challenging behaviour disruptive to other children and being denied enrolment in schools of choice ... (and) it was acknowledged that the disturbed emotional state of some of these children placed substantial limitations on their ability to be educated despite the best efforts of authorities' (Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 1996: 248-9).

For the Department of Human Services, some of the most troubling of its young clients fall into this bracket. Perhaps the responsibility should rightly rest with the Department of School Education - a point which was taken up by the auditor-general and discussed below. Nevertheless, forming an appropriate and well founded response to this situation is a difficult, ongoing and important challenge. Responsible decision making should be informed by the best available information and full cognisance of specific research and

experience. This paper sets out, albeit very briefly, to indicate factors contributing to the problem, outline several major models which are relevant to intervention, and consider what several major inquiries have found and recommended. The remainder of the paper provides examples of 5 Australian schools and one United States 'full-service school' which are deemed to have been particularly successful in achieving their purpose.

Poverty and compensatory education

Connell (1993) describes three types of global poverty, only one of which pertains to Australia - the poverty which arises from inequality in high-wage economies. Children of richer families do better in education than their poorer counterparts, even though the 1959 United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1959) established the principle of formally equal access to schooling for all children. However, an appropriate paradigm is to understand that the richest groups are highly *advantaged* and represent a minority on a continuum of advantage and disadvantage. Thus, the poorest groups suffer the most severe effects of the larger pattern, but are not outside of it.

A major policy response since the *UN Declaration* was to "substitute through official agencies for the assets the children were not getting via their actual parents. Thus compensatory education was born" (Connell, 1993:22). Education and welfare were brought together because of the co-incidence of lower levels of education, high unemployment and lower wages. The idea of a self-sustaining cycle of poverty emerged: low aspiration and poor support of children led to low educational achievement: low educational achievement would then lead to labour market failure and poverty in the next generation. Compensatory education would break the cycle.

However, false assumptions arising from this continue to direct public policy and public debate. There are three false beliefs: (1) Educational inequality is a problem about a disadvantaged minority - say 15%. Yet equally there is another minority that is highly advantaged. (2) The poor are culturally different from the majority. Thus research looks for evidence of the psychological, attitudinal or cultural distinctiveness of poor children. (3) Educational reform is a technical problem which implies top-down solutions (Connell, 1993).

How schools can contribute to the problem

Several school factors were found to contribute to child and youth homelessness and the successful completion of school by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1989:271):

- irrelevant curricula - particularly where there is a daily struggle for survival
- poor teacher-student relationships
- inflexible and alienating institutional structures
- rejection or neglect of under-achievers, lack of understanding, flexibility
- suspension and expulsions of difficult students
- lack of personal support
- lifestyle clash - the school requires a different lifestyle

- stigmatisation
- discipline and routine deters people used to fending for themselves

Related influences might be

- family conflict
- low family income
- a history of State intervention (leading to early school leaving)
- the student lacks personal and material resources

The report makes a number of important suggestions which are discussed under ‘strategies and recommendations’, below.

A multi-faceted, nation-wide research project on youth homelessness commissioned by the Salvation Army and funded by the Australian Youth Foundation, conducted interviews with 104 homeless young people, 72% from Victoria and 28% from other Australian states. The results were released under the title *No Place That’s Home* (Salvation Army, 1995). The project found that

- 61% of the sample had attended more than 5 schools.
- 43% left home and school at the same time.
- 28% left school one or two years before they left home.
- 23% left home, but remained involved in education for some time.
- Young people who had been in the care of the State tended to leave school earlier than other young people, with 22% of these leaving at primary level. 21% of all young men in the sample left school at primary level compared to 8% of the young women.
- Longer periods of homelessness were more likely to lead to early school dropout. 41% of those who had been homeless for more than 2 years had left school at primary level (Salvation Army, 1995, *Being Young and Homeless*:1-2).

A recent study commissioned by the Children’s Welfare Association of Victoria, *Educational Needs of Children in Care* (de Lemos, 1997) further found that

- One in four young teenagers in State care regularly stay away from school;
- Of the sample of children in care 34% have an identified disability, compared with the Australian figure of 2%;
- A higher incidence of learning and behavioural problems was reported for students in care compared to students in the general population.

The study notes that the combination of these factors would have a major impact on educational outcomes for the group.

BROAD ARGUMENT OR BROAD AGREEMENT?

The arguments presented here are necessarily brief, but articulate some general models which inform and frame debate.

1. Deficit/ development models

There are two fundamental models of special education as it concerns at-risk young people and accompanying learning difficulties - the *deficit* model and the *development* model.

DEFICIT MODEL

This concerns itself with an individual's degree of deficit, dysfunction, or variation from the norm.

Problems and Limitations

- Definitions of “the norm”, “deficit”, “dysfunction”, “functional literacy” and so on. What is “normal”? Why should a person be this thing called “normal”? What if a person is not going to be “normal” however much we wish it so, and no matter what we do?
- Runs into trouble where problems are likely to have a social and not biological basis, eg behavioural problems.
- Behavioural problems cannot be reliably quantified. The composite picture however, is one of “disability” or “disadvantage”.
- It relies on man-made assessment instruments as the key to defining deficit.
- It de-contextualises the individual.

Strengths

- Easy to understand. Convenient. Man's desire to define and control difficult subject matter. Objectifies.
- Bureaucracy-friendly. Enables “large system” decision making based on inflexible categories. Administrative ease.
- Appears to be fair and just through the even application of rules and definitions. Perceived impartiality.
- Has an aura of scientific authority.

DEVELOPMENT MODEL

This seeks to develop individuals in what they are. Duguid (1994) sees development as implying “an ‘unfolding’, an evolution from something to something. It also seems to imply some starting point, a notion that there is a raw material, an essence, a set of latent virtues” (Duguid, 1994:5). A development model takes account of the *whole* of a persons life. It values what a person already knows and can do and concerns itself with *difference* rather than deficit. It seeks to understand how individuals come to know what they do know (Neville, 1994; Salmon, 1980, 1990), their unique experience and world view.

Strengths

- It accounts for the social, historical and cultural context of the individual.
- It does not seek conformity.

- It does not impose rigorous definitions of disability or deficit.

Limitations

- Requires more from us to understand and to tolerate.
- Requires physical expression of tolerance.

Ainscow (1994:ii) notes that while learning difficulties have traditionally been viewed as limitations and/or disabilities of individual pupils, today it is better recognised that learning difficulties can arise as a result of a complex range of factors. These can include the nature of the curriculum, school organisation, and teachers' readiness and ability to respond to diversity in their classrooms (Ainscow, 1994) For Ainscow, deficit thinking places difficulties as exclusively student-centred, and distracts attention away from how *schooling* can be improved in order to help all children to learn successfully.

2. Integration to and retention in mainstream/ specialisation and segregation.

“Integration” can be used in a number of senses. It can refer to integrated curriculum within a school, and also to community linkages which a school may create with outside bodies or individuals. Integration can also mean the collaborative efforts that are made by the various arms of a larger structure - say educational and residential - towards providing a total service. However in the sense I use it now, I am referring to the integration of problem students back into schools from which they are presently excluded, and the inclusion or retention of a small percentage of very troublesome young people within a mainstream school. It would seem to me that at the base of this aim (if it is an aim) is the apparent ‘ideal’ of the regular school, for that is where all children will get the strongest and best education - if only they could all behave themselves and learn. The alternative is the specialist school which sets out to provide specific solutions to specific problems. I think these twin notions are not competing however, they are complimentary.

The 1988 report of the (then) Victorian Ministry of Education on students with emotional disturbance/ behaviour disorder in the Western Metropolitan Region, *The Too Hard Kids?* emphasised that the Ministry's responsibility to provide for all children to the age of 15 should be met as much as possible in the regular school (Ministry of Education, 1988:14). The report further found that where it is decided that a regular school is unable to meet the current needs of a student, the Ministry should provide or have access to other settings which can do so (Ministry of Education, 1988:15).

If problem students are to be retained in the regular school there is, first and foremost, a pedagogical question: ‘how do we teach *all* pupils and ensure their inclusion within the curriculum?’ Secondly there is a discipline question: ‘how do we uphold the school rules for the whole student body when there are clear and sometimes very serious breaches of those rules which routinely result in suspensions and expulsions?’ On the other hand, if problem students are to be segregated then pertinent questions are: ‘on what basis are they segregated, how is the problem student defined, what are they segregated to and can that apparatus meet the young person's needs?’ This immediately raises a discourse of disability/disadvantage/impairment/disorder which, at the present time, is dominated by an entrenched, medically-based and behaviourist-based deficit model (Brown, 1997). Fulcher

(1988,1989) for example, points to the British *Warnock Report* (1978) and its associated legislation, the *Education Act* (1981) whose language had the effect of extending disability to fully 20% of the school population (Fulcher, 1989:12). Similarly, a recent promotional circular sent to Australian schools claimed that Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder is estimated to effect “somewhere between 8% and 12% of children - one to two per classroom” (Kenter, 1996:1). On the other hand, students who are considered ‘at-risk’, ‘emotionally or behaviourally disturbed’ or simply ‘difficult’ do not fit easily into medically-defined categories of specific disability. A recent DEETYA publication intended to support teachers of students with disabilities, for example, offers advice on AD/HD and psychiatric impairment but excludes at-risk students who are not so defined (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1996).

A further effect of a dysfunction model for school placement is its tendency, from a legislative and policy standpoint, to amplify enormously the bureaucratic procedures surrounding integration and segregation (Fulcher, 1989; Slee, 1997). Fulcher argues powerfully that this has little to do with better teaching practices, but rather it has to do with

“ ... formal, political responses to procedural requirements which the law or a report imposes: these responses merely comply with the law as opposed to achieving the aims of the law” (Fulcher, 1989:13).

For Slee,

“Integration is thus framed within a linear Cartesian logic that forges disability as a problem for calculus ... Equity equals child plus additional resources [$E=C+AR$]” (Slee, 1997: 6).

It is evident that there are a core of students, and particularly those under State care, whose needs cannot be met by the mainstream. The argument for special schools is strong.

3. Focus on curriculum: social/ academic education.

Questions surrounding curriculum might include

- *What* is the curriculum designed to do?
- *Whose* curriculum is it?
- *Why* this curriculum?
- *How* is it implemented?
- *How* is it experienced by the students?
- *Is* it resisted by students? *How* much? *Why*?
- *Is* it democratic?

Poor academic achievement is a common theme amongst at-risk youth. Academic deficit is not only an obvious conclusion in a deficit model but it is also a perplexing conundrum for all participants in the educational task. One is immediately drawn to a notion of ‘catching up’ - compensatory academic education which can focus on the areas of greatest need (commonly literacy), prioritise it and work the student towards significant and key competencies. Frequently, progress in literacy is held to be critical to future success and fulfilment, both by scholars and industry leaders and in popular community perceptions.

Federal Schools Minister Senator Chris Ellison announced on March 18th 1998 that a new Government national plan to improve general standards of literacy would focus on early intervention, with children having their reading and writing skills assessed within the first two years of primary school (Mitchell, 1998).

Yet equally, at-risk young people are held wanting in social skills, good inter-personal relationship and acceptable interaction with the public. It is argued that these “socialisation deficits” are most important. They block effective education and mean abrasive encounters with you and I. A “social education” might encompass human development, interpersonal relationships, communication, sexuality, values, emotions, identity and so on.

One consideration for programs which involve dealings with the public or being in public places is a requirement for trust that the young people can and will behave appropriately. Inevitable this will not always be the case and teachers feel strain, embarrassment and irresponsibility for their charge when incidents erupt. The public does not want an ugly scene in their swimming pool, on their bus or in their theatre. Yet trust cannot be developed in the young people without the opportunity for the exercise of that trust.

An integrated curriculum is compelling. It means not only integrated academic and social curricula, but also being in the wider community. Integrated program design is key to St. Vincent's and to many other special settings, and is emphasised in the recent Victorian *Education Review Committee: Consultant's Report* (Withers and Russell, 1997). Integration can also mean tapping into local community resources or supports and creating two-way linkages between a special school and related schools and organisations. Croxton School, Melbourne, provides exemplary demonstration of this in having established partnerships with other local schools, a student exchange partnership and linkage to metropolitan TAFE colleges. In this way Croxton has moved part way towards “full service schooling”, discussed below. Overarching an integrated program philosophy is a key need to develop for each individual a *learning plan* which asks not only what that person is being taught but how best they can be taught it.

4. Transitional /“last stop” models for at-risk young people.

Following argument surrounding integration and mainstreaming is the question, if a special school for at-risk young people, is it “transitional” or is it in practice the end of the road for a number of compulsory-age students, or a combination of both? *The Too Hard Kids?* inquiry of the Victorian Ministry of Education, for example, recommends that the regular school maintains overall responsibility for the student while attending an alternate setting, and “... the aims of such settings should be to enable the student to return successfully to a regular school as soon as possible” (Ministry of Education, 1988:15).

Transition from mainstream schools through special schools (there may be more than one) and back to a “better” school has overtones of idealism, as for many students the ideal is not met. Accounting for those who cannot transition in the desired way is an important consideration.

A FEW QUESTIONS

Some fundamental questions surrounding a ‘best practice’ model of educational response to at-risk young people might include:

- What does it set out to do? (Its aims).
- How does it do this?
- Who is it designed to serve? Will it? does it?

The Too Hard Kids? identifies Melbourne’s Outer Western region as an area of greatest need because of its remoteness and expanding population, and recommends specific facilities including ‘holding units’ for children in acute crisis (Ministry of Education, 1988:56) The same report identifies a greater need in post-primary than in primary (1988: 21).

- How is the target group identified and defined?

A definition offered by *The Too Hard Kids?* suggests 2 levels of incidence: (1) 2% of school children in the Western region are severely disturbed and (2) about 10% of the same population who demonstrate concerning behaviours, including truancy and children rejecting a mainstream curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1988: ii).

- What criteria are used for enrolment?
- What means are used for referral? What does this say about selection?
- What sort of groupings within the school?

STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Too Hard Kids? (Ministry of Education, 1988:35) identifies the following factors among schools which appear to be catering quite well for problem kids:

- articulated student welfare philosophy and student welfare personnel
- communication between welfare personnel and teachers
- structured system of year level co-ordinators
- clear understanding of the system by students, staff and parents
- contact with School Support Centres
- contact with parents

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1989) found that regular schools are not only ill-equipped to identify and respond to difficulties but also actively reject students in difficult circumstances (1989:273). One should consider that schools have to protect their student populations and preserve their right to education. Nevertheless, to assist at-risk students and retain them in school, it is suggested:

- an expanded role of school counsellors, however, students may not be aware of or do not wish to use such service
- intensive training for school counsellors for their ‘welfare role’
- training programs aimed at giving teachers greater understanding of behavioural problems
- preventative and early intervention programs aimed at ‘at risk’ children
- innovative truancy prevention programs (assisted by state and territory authorities)

- specially designed accommodation and support services located near to schools in the areas of greatest need, serving students detached from their families
- a 'How to Cope Kit'
- facilities to teach human relationships
- housing education on curricula plus life skills, personal development and parenting skills
- creative alternatives to suit the less conforming personality
- teachers "at large" and
- outreach services.

The Victorian Auditor-General's Office (1996: 252-256) found that considerable effort has been made by the Department of School Education to provide educational opportunities to disadvantaged children, including children in care. A range of settings to assist these students now include

- community schools;
- special education units providing limited term specialised teaching;
- medical centres with limited term schooling for students with psychiatric problems;
- teaching units attached to mainstream schools providing 'time out' to overcome acute difficulties;
- the Distance Education Centre providing schooling by correspondence.

However, these initiatives cannot reach a small core of "school refusers" who have no intention of continuing their education although they are still of compulsory school age. Audit points to several weaknesses in the framework which could be addressed, including

- Education of children in care a joint responsibility between Department of Human Services and the Directorate of School Education, with DSE providing the schooling opportunities and DHS providing the support to those opportunities. This to include improved protocols between the Departments, co-ordinated research and consolidated data on the education outcomes of children under guardianship;
- DHS to provide detailed guidance to case workers on how the educational needs of these children can be met, including guidance as to the case worker's specific responsibilities in regard to the education component, and follow-up evaluation by case workers as to the effectiveness or otherwise of any special supports provided by schools;
- Case files of children in care to contain more evaluative comment on the child's academic needs and progress at prior schools, as well as observations of learning difficulties and how best to overcome them through school support;
- Onus on DHS to minimise the trauma associated with the child's living environment to better facilitate education;
- DHS to play a major role in identifying at the earliest possible stage emerging problems such as truancy, refusal, poor behaviour and poor academic progress and actively work with schools to develop constructive solutions.

Apart from background, audit acknowledged three key barriers to learning which could be addressed:

- the impact of multiple placements
- relationships between schools and case managers, and
- a lack of liaison between authorities in addressing the suspension, expulsion and exclusion of children from schools (VAGO,1996:249-252).

Practical solutions put forward by the Salvation Army Youth Support Project of 1995 place a like emphasis on student welfare support and school counsellors (Salvation Army 1995: 16). Recommended strategies for education include

- Student Welfare Co-ordinators;
Adequate welfare support in all schools including access to a full time Student Welfare Co-ordinator. The SWC's role is different to that of teachers but linked closely to them. Recognition of the importance of SWC's in all school charters. The SWC to be supported by youth and family counsellors, drug and alcohol support services, mental health services, accommodation and support providers and others as necessary - thus acting as a bridge between the school and the broader community for young people;
- School welfare services available out of school hours to facilitate access for young people who are already alienated from the school community;
- Special assistance to homeless youth returning to education, in the form of stable and secure accommodation, adequate income, and flexible school hours so that they can take care of the business of survival. Ardoch-Windsor, Melbourne, is a model;
- Expand the Commonwealth *Students At Risk* Program (initiated 1993) to include this form of assistance, and with Student Welfare Co-ordinators in mind (Salvation Army, 1995, *Practical Solutions*: 16).

Strategies to improve outcomes in employment and training to include

- *Case management* for unemployed people (a Working Nation initiative) is seen as a way of ensuring more positive outcomes, however, meaningful training programs need to be attached to employment opportunities. Training programs cannot be too short-lived, pitched at the wrong level, inaccessible or irrelevant to achieving employment, or in areas where employment options are severely limited. Homeless and unemployed people want training that leads to employment, not training for the sake of training;
- Case managers to be skilled workers able to engage young people over a long period;
- *Targeted training programs* to equip young people with basic literacy, numeracy and work-based experience. Training should be associated with paid, hands-on work experience which offers a chance to develop and apply skills while operating in a work environment (which involves social interaction and lifestyle orientation).

Pathways

A key concept, now framing the work of St. Vincent's Education and Training and Rice Youth Services, is that of *individual pathways*. Pathways can be seen as a set of educational and behavioural goals and strategies, developed with a contribution from the young person, towards promoting growth. It is a holistic concept that encompasses all aspects of development and seeks to integrate important individual goals and bring greater

certainty for the future. In concept it reflects Duguid's (1994) notion of a developmental model as maturation, a movement *from* something *to* something and distinct from "change" or "transformation". The constraints of this paper preclude a fuller exposition of the pathways concept but will await a future opportunity.

Full-Service Schooling

Full-service schooling has gained increased attention and emphasis in recent years (Semmens, 1997; Withers and Russell, 1997) and offers a compelling model of wide-ranging special education and services for at-risk populations of young people. Increasingly, a fragmented approach to service provision is seen as limited in effectiveness and possibly intensifying the practical difficulties of seeking and getting support (Withers and Russell, 1997).

The full-service school can be seen as one in which education is offered along with a range of support services in a comprehensive and collaborative way, so that physical, social, psychological and educational requirements can be met rationally and holistically (Dryfoos, 1994). Semmens (1997) sees full-service schooling as an extension of developments that have taken place over the last twenty years towards more comprehensive student welfare responses that are shared between teachers and a range of health and welfare professionals. Full-service schooling is a preventative approach which combines education, health and welfare services and features common elements of:

- commitment to better learning outcomes for all students
- strengthening collaborative links between home, school and community
- democratic school governance
- co-ordination between providers and agencies
- involvement of local government, local employers and local community groups
- inclusion of social justice initiatives such as legal advice and delinquency prevention (Semmens, 1997:2).

While a wide range of support services can be offered within a full-service school, the biggest challenge is seen to be the development of true collaboration across professional staff groups, students, parents and community members (Withers and Russell, 1997). Collaboration is more than co-location of services or short term co-operation between them. It is fundamental that members of all groups within the school community participate as partners in the development of the vision. There is increasingly a belief that full-service schooling should not be confined only to communities designated as high-risk (Withers and Russell, 1997). Full-service schooling has the potential for a future vision of independence and full *citizenship* of its students, and not mere crisis management (Semmens, 1997:8).

Salome Urena offers an example of full-service schooling.

Salome Urena Middle Academies Intermediate School, New York City

[These notes are summarised from Dryfoos, 1994].

A purpose-built middle school built in 1992 and enrolling 1200 students in a largely Hispanic area. It provides education, health, mental health and social services on site. It began as a partnership between the New York City school system and the Children's Aid Society with a US \$30 million budget.

Students are enrolled in one of four academies:

- Maths/ science/ technology
- Business
- Expressive Arts
- Community service.

The school is open from 7 am - 10 pm every day and includes

- Dance, recreation and breakfast
- A 3 - 6 pm after-school program
- Evening classes
- Summer programs
- All activities designed in collaboration with educators
- A Family Resource Centre offering help with immigration and citizenship, employment, housing, crisis intervention, drug abuse prevention and adult education
- A shop which raises \$40,000 annually and staffed by students of the school
- A clinic providing medical, dental, psychiatric and social services.

Administration is effected jointly as a partnership between the school system and the Children's Aid Society. Dryfoos comments that it "is essentially a new institution with education as its centrepiece. The school has become the centre of community life and community activity, equally accessible and welcoming for children and parents" (Dryfoos, 1994:107).

Examples of school-based programs for at-risk students in Australia

[The following examples are summarised from detailed discussion in Batten and Russell (1995:59-66)].

Ardoch-Windsor, Melbourne

- Catering for homeless students
- Open admissions policy
- Absence of restrictive practices
- A belief that everyone can learn
- Articulation of 11 declared aims governing the school's operation, in brief: *support for students, support for school staff, prevention, intervention, self-esteem, motivation, trust, information, advocacy, access to education and homelessness awareness.*

Oxley, Queensland

- A limited-hours "Pathways Program" held within the regular school but separate from it.
- Focus on re-integration to the regular classroom.

- Emphasis on maths, English and social education as the fundamental areas to be addressed before re-integration
- 60% of students came from other schools but on completion of the program they would be integrated into Oxley, and then encouraged to attend other local schools
- Monitoring of students after re-integration
- Placement in the program depended on real commitment from the student as well as at least one family member or significant other.

Key operating principles at Oxley include

- Students to assume responsibility for their choices, behaviour and learning
- Acquiring planning skills
- Awareness of consequences of actions
- Sharing and support amongst fellow students.

Banksia Park, South Australia

- Focus on changing low retention rates with special assistance to year 11 students
- Solutions involve parents, other staff, special programs or contractual agreements between all parties
- At-risk students withdrawn and offered options including: coaching in 'key areas', bridging courses, alteration of existing courses, a Vocation and Community Access Program or assistance towards employment.

Bridgewater High school, Tasmania

- 'Our House' building project. The students and staff built the house during one school year.
- The curriculum was practical and relevant to the student's life situations, written around the tasks associated with buying the land, the building calendar and selling the house. Curriculum also covered the maths, English, science and social science involved in the project
- Student decision making
- Students took responsibility for the distribution of the funds proceeding from sale of the house (\$10,350)
- Resulted in changes in pupils attitudes to school
- Mean gains in literacy and numeracy
- Those who left during the project went into steady employment
- Those who remained settled into the normal curriculum the following year.

Berengarra, Melbourne

An independent secondary school for students with learning difficulties, social/emotional difficulties and a record of chronic dysfunction in mainstream schools. Features include

- Small class sizes with a ratio of 1:10
- Emphasis on the resolution of problems by analysis and discussion and the avoidance of force

- Daily school meetings to provide a forum for the resolution of conflicts and for recognition of achievements (the speaker ‘holds the conch’)
- Ownership of one’s behaviour
- Peer pressure used to modify socially unacceptable behaviour
- Parent involvement
- Use of contracts.

And finally, the following 11 points were designated by the teaching staff of **St. Vincent’s, Melbourne** as crucial to the success of educational response to at-risk youth:

- *Flexibility.*
- *Balance or integration* of academic and socially-oriented education, and of on-campus and off campus activity.
- *Creativity* is to be encouraged in the way the school responds to its students.
- *Linkage* to external community bodies.
- *Student engagement* or participation in a process of learning. Little can be done without the student’s consenting and voluntary involvement in the program.
- *Appropriate student mix*, referred to as achieving “critical mass”, particularly if a co-educational setting.
- *Good selection of staff.*
- *Advocacy.* Individual pathways managed at exit point. Assistance to “transit”.
- *Appropriate assessment materials.*
- *Adequate funding.*
- *A nurturing ethos.*

Ineffective or Harmful Strategies

From a wide ranging search of the literature, Withers and Russell (1997, unpublished; also Withers and Batten, 1995; Batten and Russell, 1995) found the following (amongst others) to be ineffective or harmful strategies:

- Home counselling by social workers with large caseloads, insight-oriented family counselling and individual psychotherapy with delinquents.
- Programs which do not involve a cognitive change in the young person’s world view, such as Outward Bound when offered alone or systems of earning points when offered alone. Work experience or vocational education alone.
- School practices of: suspension, detention, expulsion, corporal punishment or employment of security guards.
- Low achievers placed in ability groupings as a result, in part, of lower teacher expectations.

Themes emerging from the literature on ineffective and harmful strategies are:

- Focus on a single approach in the absence of a comprehensive approach.
- Sole focus on the offending

- Delay in the timing of program provision until it is too late
- Sole focus on one risk factor
- Intensifying risk factors and/or reducing protective factors, for example multiple inadequate placements, contact with an anti-social peer group
- Failure to address risk factors at all, for example, making pledges.

WHAT IS BEST?

It is evident that no single model can be taken to be *the best* model of *the best* practice in intervention education strategies for at-risk students. However a number of common and important themes emerge. These include an increased emphasis on and support to a broad range of student welfare services and initiatives, consideration to timely and on-site professional intervention, and outreach services to remote and expanding populations.

Curriculum should be flexible, adaptable, achievable and relevant to student's real life experiences. It should integrate academic and social needs and seek creative means to teach them effectively. Schools which have been reasonably successful in their purpose share a common expectation that students take responsibility for their own actions, and also require parent involvement in the task. This latter point fails however, in cases where parent involvement is minimal or non-existent as is common amongst children in care.

Individual case management, planned and co-ordinated pathways which can accommodate full developmental needs, and targeted programs have emerged strongly in present trends. The concept of full-service schooling is increasingly seen as a means of drawing together those things which seem required to promote full citizenship and reduce the risk of school drop-out, alienation and crime. Fragmented service provision and crisis management is inadequate to deal with the problem.

Justice Fogarty warns of the process of reform being budget driven rather than service driven, and is particularly concerned over cuts to the non-government sector which has and continues to be a core feature of Australian child protection (Fogarty, 1993:31). It will not do to simply work back from a fixed fiscal position. Further, the present era of competitive tendering of services puts a new complexion on the whole framework. But ultimately, Fogarty notes, "the community will get the system which it insists on and which it is prepared to pay for" (1993:4).

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