

"Hanging Out - Hanging On - Hanging In" or is it "Elect Out, Drift Out and Driven Out." What works for "At-Risk" students - how a Connected or Generative Pedagogy improves student educational outcomes for all but in particular for marginalised students

David Zyngier
Monash University - Australia

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Correspondence:

David Zyngier
Faculty of Education, Monash University,
P.O. Box 527, Frankston, Victoria, 3199 AUSTRALIA.
Phone: (03) 9904 4230 Fax: (03) 9904 4027
Email: David.Zyngier@Education.Monash.edu.au

Hanging Out - Hanging - On - Hanging In or Elect Out, Drift Out and Driven Out. What Works for "At-Risk" Students - how a Connected or Generative Pedagogy improves student educational outcomes for all but in particular for marginalised students.

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

Abstract:

Significant interest and concern are currently evident in Australian education with regard to student retention; attendance (participation) and achievement rates in post compulsory schooling. Important work is currently being undertaken in Australia (and elsewhere) on the kinds of classroom pedagogies that improve outcomes for all students, but in particular those variously labeled as "at-risk". The literature suggests a picture of an "upside down quality" in schooling with those procedures most likely to engage students in learning decreasing at the very age when it was most needed. Research published in various national and international reports reinforces the conclusion that the curriculum for many if not most students but in particular marginalised working class youth, is not connected to their personal life experiences and/or interests. This paper reports on research-in-progress that seeks to determine whether a change from a dominant school pedagogy to one which has at its core students' backgrounds and lived experiences, will improve student educational outcomes for all but in particular for those nominated as at risk students. Findings suggests that a Generative or Connected Pedagogy needs to take account of students own reasons for why they are disengaged from schooling and explores the changes schools and teachers themselves need to consider, including the interests and involvement of students in decision-making processes and the inclusion of intellectually challenging material for students 'at educational risk'.

Introduction

There is significant interest and concern expressed about student retention participation and achievement rates in post compulsory schooling. Governments and schools have developed many programs to improve outcomes in the areas of student engagement and disengagement with learning. I argue that the most successful of these programs engage the learner with the real world.

Referring to the results of the significant longitudinal Queensland study I explain that the term connectedness is more than merely "real life" or practical education. Connectedness must enable students to have more control of their lives and be connected to a more participatory social vision of society. This article discusses the preliminary findings of research into so-called alternative school based programs designed to improve outcomes for at risk students within the context of improving outcomes for all students but in particular those who have been identified as "at-risk of disengagement".

I conclude that what is required is a student *generative* pedagogy that empowers participants to challenge discriminatory social policy, achieve greater self-determination and tackle the underlying structural problems that lead to discrimination and disadvantage. I include some questions for classroom teachers and all those interested in socially just educational outcomes for students. These questions challenge current conceptions about education.

The research

Many secondary schools are responding to these issues by developing and implementing their own programs and/or using or modifying programs developed elsewhere, adapting them to their own specific needs. The research aimed to assist the Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) and the secondary schools and teachers in the area to gain an appreciation for the non-traditional and non-systemic programs. The LLEN, which commissioned this research, is particularly interested in developing a better picture of and sharing information about these programs in schools.

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

By **non-traditional** (or alternative) we mean learning experiences that are not necessarily linked to traditional school curricula. By **non-systemic** (or school-specific) we mean learning experiences that are not mandated by a schooling system (for example, by DE&T) but have been devised, adapted and/or adopted by the school itself. An analysis of these programs will be very useful in identifying important programs and their features, which promote student attendance, retention and achievement.

Specifically, this paper will identify:

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

A review of the academic and research literature programs designed for "at-risk" students is followed by comparison between these school programs under review and the criteria for good program design based on the literature reviewed.

Research Methodology

Teacher Survey

Initial questions for the teacher survey developed by the Research Team were modified in light of feedback received from the LLEN's teacher reference group. Ethical approval was also sought and obtained from the university Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans. During October 2002, all secondary school principals in the area received a letter explaining the research, together with an information sheet, the survey and a consent form. One school was unable to participate without clearance from the Catholic Education Office while the principal of another was "not sure" she could fill out the survey. This was a very busy time of the year for schools and it was often difficult to connect with the appropriate or nominated member of staff.

Student Focus Groups

The research questions for the student focus groups have been drafted by the Research Team and modified according to feedback from the LLEN Youth Advisory Reference Group (YARG) in November 2002. The questions were further adjusted according to feedback received from individuals in this group who met with the Research Team on two occasions,

which also participated in a half day planning and briefing session of the YARG in December 2002, which included training on conducting a focus group. (Ethical approval to conduct the student focus groups also obtained from the university Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans.)

Primary data collection

Of the 18 secondary schools in the area, 11 schools have either returned surveys or have been interviewed or both. 21 completed surveys have been received from teachers in 8 schools and 20 interviews conducted with teachers in these and other schools. Follow up interviews clarified issues raised in some surveys. These took place in March and early April. Student Focus Groups are planned to begin in late August 2003.

Teacher Survey

By the end of November 2002, all schools had been contacted; members of staff nominated and survey material distributed. Teachers were able to nominate whether they preferred to fill out the survey or be interviewed over the telephone or in person. Some teachers both filled out the survey and had a personal interview. No teachers chose to be interviewed over the telephone. Three government schools that had not replied or had not been in contact in 2002 were re-contacted in February 2003 and surveys were resent to them. Only one independent school returned a survey. Audiotapes of all interviews have been transcribed and coded and have while not being directly quoted, informed this paper.

Student Focus Groups

Although not part of this paper we plan to hold semi-structured interviews with students from these programs. Focus groups will be restricted to no more than 5 participants in each group. Schools with more than one program may have more than one focus group. Instructions for the administration of the focus group interviews have been developed and volunteer Focus Group Leaders have been briefed on their participation in the research during March. These volunteers conducting the focus group interviews will be drawn from those who have undertaken training provided by the LLEN's Youth Advisory Reference Group (YARG).

Environmental Scan ¹

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

The Shire Council's Municipal Strategic Statement notes that it has a permanent population of approximately 120,000 people (1999). This increases to over 180,000 people during the summer peak period. The resident population is projected to reach 127,000 by 2006 and over 146,000 by 2021. The population consists of approximately 48,900 households, with an average household size of 2.45 persons. People aged 65 and over make up 21 per cent of the Shire's population, compared with the Melbourne average of 15 per cent.

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

- A high and increasing proportion of the population aged 60 or over (21.5% compared to the Melbourne metropolitan figure of 15.3%).
- A considerably low level of people with tertiary education qualifications compared to the Melbourne metropolitan figure (14.8 per cent compared to 19.4 per cent) in 1996.
- A significant percentage of the population in areas with no qualifications.
- A high proportion of unoccupied private dwellings at the time of the census: August, which is winter (35% compared to the metropolitan Melbourne figure of 8%).

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

- An elevated proportion of low-income earners (51% of the population, aged 15 years and over, earning less than \$300 per week, compared to the metropolitan Melbourne figure of 46%).
- Elevated unemployment levels in pockets compared to both municipal averages as well as that of Melbourne.
- Library membership at 33 per cent of the population, significantly lower than the 51 per cent for Melbourne

These characteristics reflect the high use of the area for seasonal (summer) recreation and holiday-making, a relatively high proportion of retirees in the permanent population and a relative lack of high-paying employment opportunities in the immediate area.

Educational Institutions, Student Participation and Youth Aspirations

There are 36 providers of education and training within the region: 18 schools (4 government, 2 catholic and 2 independent), 1 TAFE, 16 Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) providers and 1 University. Collectively, these institutions provide programs that lead to degrees, diplomas and certificates (including the VCE, VCAL and Certificates I-IV), and access to VETIS (including structured workplace learning) and part-time apprenticeships. Some of these institutions, particularly ACFEs, also provide non-award courses and support to those seeking to access education, training and employment. While the provision of VETIS and Structured Workplacements in the region from 2001 to 2002 has increased, over the same period there has been a decrease of 17.8% in the number of employers providing workplacements and a halving of the number of part-time new apprenticeships.

Around 60% of workers are employed in one of four industries: manufacturing, retail, health and community services. Youth tend to be employed in retail, manufacturing and construction. National Economics forecasts are that from 1998 to 2010, four industries will double in size in their employee numbers: manufacturing, health, business services and construction. Increased casualisation of the labour force and reclassification of official unemployment definitions have tended to mask the true situation. Young people, especially males with low education status who may have left school early, have less secure job prospects than those with qualifications or trades and may lack the opportunity to build their own human capital, including skills in knowing the protocols of how to behave at work, how to work in a team etc.

Youth involvement in education, training and employment

Youth activities were characterized by employment (28.7%) and secondary schooling (27.9%), in almost equal proportions, followed by participation in TAFE (20.7%). Lower on the list were the numbers of youth not engaged in any form of education, training or employment (12.6%) and then those enrolled in university (10.1%). Both of these last two are of concern: the first (no study, no work), because it is worryingly high compared with metropolitan Melbourne and National figures, particularly the 6.6% of youth (2027 individuals in 2001) about whom little else is known; the second (university enrolment), because it is worryingly low compared with the Victorian State average university enrolment of approximately 35% for this age group. This low enrolment of youth in university is of particular concern against a backdrop of students' high General Achievement Test (GAT) results (Teese, R. 2002) and yet low application rates to university. Drawing on 1998/1999 figures, Teese notes that the region '... has the highest rate [close to 45%] of "non-application" amongst male school completers in metropolitan Melbourne.' In other words, 'the comparatively low [school] retention rates [discussed below] do not lead to a greater concentration on university.' For both males and females, "every third teenager completing school looks elsewhere and does not seek to build directly on their VCE through tertiary education" (2002, p. 43).

University enrolments (from the total population, not just youth) have risen 7% from 2000 to 2002, so that around 2% of the total population was enrolled in university in March 2002. However, this is still around 2.5% below the Melbourne average and, to reiterate, it is not clear how many of these enrolments are local youth. There are signs that the prospect of a large Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) debt associated with Australian university study presents a barrier to participation – probably at the point of application – particularly for low socioeconomic groups evident in pockets of the region. The proportion of

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

More youth are staying on at school; less are leaving early. The apparent retention rate of Year 10-12 students across all local government schools rose from 68.7% in 2001 to 69.5% in 2002; a rise of 1.2%. This was considerably lower than the 10.2% rise in the State-wide Year 10-12 apparent retention rate (for both government and non-government schools) from 78.4% in 2001 to 86.4% in 2002. While the basis for these figures are not exactly comparable – the local figures relate exclusively to government schools while the state-wide figures also include non-government schools – the lower than average non-government school sector in the region increases their comparative usefulness for indicative purposes, with caution.

Most of the government secondary schools have instituted programs, which – among other things – are intended to address student retention. In 2001, 28.7% of youth were engaged in full or part-time work. By National Economics estimates, a further 11.5% combined full or part-time work with study. The Dusseldorp Skills Forum defines 'youth at risk' as those not in full time education, not in full time employment and not actively seeking either activity. In 2002, this included 20.5% of all Australian youth (15.4% of 15-19 year olds and 25.5% of 20-24 year olds); in 2001, the figure was 20.8% (15.1% for 15-19 year olds and 26.5% for 20-24 year olds). It is important to bear in mind that youth in part-time education combined with part-time employment are considered 'at risk' by this definition (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2002).

In 2001, 3,826 or 12.6% of these youth were 'at risk', but this does not include youth in part-time study and/or work. By National Economics estimates, this would add a further 16.5% to produce 29.1% of 'at risk' youth, almost 50% higher than the 2001 Australian average. Given the 46.8% reduction from 2001 to 2002 in the number of youth receiving Youth Allowance, high numbers of 'at risk' youth are of particular concern. The needs of these youth require differentiation in order to promote their inclusion in mainstream activities; particularly homeless youth, some Indigenous youth, youth with disabilities, refugee youth and single parents. Frequently, these are the youth who leave school early and display ongoing marginal attachment to work, further education and training, skills development and community participation. Information about the destinations of early school leavers varies. For example, indicative destinations data suggests that early school leavers from local government secondary schools proceeding to unknown destinations have risen from 32% in 2001 to 40.4% in 2002. However, MIPS and the Action/Transition Project provide far richer data on these students, with around 6% of students in 2002 whose destinations remain unknown.

The apparent retention rate for these secondary schools is also a contentious issue. The term 'apparent' reflects that retention rates are influenced by factors not taken into account by these rates. These factors include student movement between schools and between education sectors, school clusters and amalgamations, students repeating year levels, interstate and overseas migration and the presence of full fee-paying overseas students. Any of these factors can alter the numerator or the denominator in the formula for calculating the apparent retention rate.

Education participation and attainment

In 2001, 51.6% of local 15 to 19 year olds were enrolled in a secondary school, 63% of 15 to 18 year olds, or 76.4% of 15 to 17 year olds. The decrease in participation in schooling by youth as they get older is matched by an increase in their participation in sectors other than school together with their withdrawal from educational institutions altogether. The proportions of 18 and 19 year olds who were not attending any education institution (38.3% and 47.6%) or were attending an institution other than a school (37.9% and 47.3%) were almost equal (assuming non-stated institutions were not schools). 15, 16 and 17 year olds not attending school also tended to be not attending any other education institution by a ratio of 1.5 to 1 (assuming on this occasion that not-stated institutions were predominantly schools). the number of residents in 2001 with a Year 12 (or equivalent) qualification or above was below

comparable measures – metropolitan Melbourne, country Victoria, and Victoria as a whole – across almost all age groups.

Cultural and linguistic backgrounds

At the 2001 Census, 1,102 residents reported that they were from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds or both. At the 2001 Census, 13,829 people were identified as being born overseas and having a non-English speaking background (NESB, meaning 5 years or more experience of a language other than English (LOTE) as the first language). The total NESB population was 44,949 people. While English is the first language for the vast majority of the combined population (88% in 2001) and most (75% in 2001) are Australian born, from 1996 to 2001, the number of NESB residents in the total FMP population increased to 19.2%. Italian, German and Greek were the dominant non-English languages spoken at home on the Peninsula in 2001, although these were in significantly smaller proportions than for the Melbourne average. Other cultural and linguistic backgrounds include people from: the Oceanian region; North-Eastern, Southern and Eastern Europe; Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East; South-East, North-East, Southern and Central Asia; and people from the Americas.

Participation in secondary education

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

Early School Leaving

Apparent retention rates vary considerably between government schools in the area. For all schools, apparent retention is higher between Years 7 to 10 than between Years 7 to 12, with retention falling away most noticeably in Year 11 but also in Year 12. From the beginning of the 1998 to 2001 period to its end apparent retention rates for the eleven government secondary schools in the area increased in most categories – in some cases, illustrating a turn around from an initial decline. However, apparent retention rates for Year 10 to Year 11 seem to have moved in opposite directions, first rising and then declining overall. Bearing in mind that the apparent retention rates for the State include non-government schools, the apparent retention rates for regional government schools in 2001 were well below these. In 2001, Victoria's apparent retention rates were second only to the ACT. In 2000, the *Ministerial Review of Education and Training Pathways Report* (known as the *Kirby Report*) published early school leaving data for 1998 by region, which indicated that FMP had the highest rate of early school leaving in the Metropolitan area, along with the outer-east and north-west regions of Melbourne. In 1998, the rate of early school leaving in FMP was between 21-30% for girls, and over 36% for boys. (Ministerial Review, p.51). In a recent analysis of early school leaving data – particularly focused on north-west Melbourne and on this region – Teese suggested that as students progress through secondary school, 'the motive for early leaving tends to be transferred from school-related factors to the demand for work' (2002, p. 29). In Teese's account, school-related reasons for leaving school are more concerning than work-related ones and, more generally, 'not all early [school] leaving is bad' (2002, p. 5). With regard to school-related motives, Teese suggests that student 'improvements in achievement are

crucial for reducing early leaving' (2002, p. 31) from school, given that 'attitudes towards school weaken as reported learning difficulties become greater' (2002, p. 29). In 1999, The Report *Keeping Kids at School* similarly claimed that 'schools with high levels of absence tend to achieve lower academic results' (DET, 1999, p. 6). In Victorian secondary schools, including the Southern Metropolitan Region in which schools are located, absenteeism peaks in Year 9 and declines thereafter. If Teese's assessment above has currency here, school-related motives for absenteeism would seem to diminish as students progress through school. Unlike some regions in Victoria where both low achievement and early school leaving are found, Teese (2002) suggests that early school leaving in this region is not associated with low levels of scholastic achievement.

Early school leaver destinations

Data on the known destinations of early school leavers from government, catholic and private schools are available through the government's CASES system, although this relies on the stated intentions of exiting students. Data supplied by FMP secondary schools (8 government schools in 2001, 11 government schools in 2002) indicate that large numbers of early school leavers (32% in 2001, 40.4% in 2002) leave for 'unknown destinations' and to 'other destinations' (18.3% in 2001, 6.1% in 2002). Discounting students transferring to other schools and/or moving interstate/overseas, in 2002 the destinations of 59.5% of the remaining students were unclear. Because the data draw on different sample sizes, it is difficult to determine whether this constitutes an increase or decrease in absolute numbers of students proceeding to unspecified destinations. Apart from students taking up apprenticeships (3.1% in 2001, 7.9% in 2002), information on the percentage of students proceeding on to other forms of education is also absent. Teese suggests that 'about half of all early leavers proceed to some recognized form of education or training within a year 35 of leaving school' (2002, p. 33).

Recent local surveys (Centre for Adolescent Health, 1999; Frankston Youth Forum, August 2000; i.d.Consulting, August 2001; Monash University, August 1999) suggest that, while acknowledging that young people face difficult challenges, many adults believe that young people are involved in anti-social behaviour. For example, one-third of the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula population believes that youth contribution to the community is negative (i.d.Consulting, August 2001). Another survey (Centre for Adolescent Health, 1999) found that, compared to other regions, young people have heightened risk factors, especially in relation to school attachment and family histories of anti-social behaviour.

Youth themselves have raised (Frankston Council Youth Services, September 1999; Frankston Youth Forum, August 2000) the following issues as important:

- Depression and mental health including lack of acceptance,
- expectations and family or social pressures,
- drugs and alcohol including associated crime, family breakdown including lack of parenting networks,
- finding employment and alternative programs,
- identity and personal development including poor communication skills,
- family breakdown especially identified in NESB and aboriginal families
- lack of parenting networks for young and single mothers
- violence, bullying, conflict and anger management and lack of suitable youth activities.

A Literature Review of What Works for "At-Risk" Students

The Policy Context

Federal and state government policies determine how schools and more broadly school systems respond to the needs of "at-risk" youth. Angwin et al. suggest that although individual schools were expected to be the responsible agent for "at-risk" youth, schools have in the past not been the sites of research (Angwin et al. 2001).

Targets for increasing the participation, retention and student achievement (Hanging Out - Hanging On - Hanging In) has meant that more and more young people are staying on in

schools but still face multiple barriers to achieving improved outcomes (The Allen Consulting Group 2003, p. 4). While some schools have developed alternative learning programs the current emphasis on increasing student retention means [almost regardless] those students who require more assistance miss out in favour of those already likely to be successful (Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001b, p. 23).

The most critical factor in quality learning is quality teaching and this needs time. Bourdieu writes that the surest thing we can say about the accumulation of cultural capital is that it occurs over time in the (right) company of the bearers of cultural capital (Bourdieu, P 1997). If governments support the concept of life long learning they also must advocate education policies that reinforce student engagement and positive educational outcomes.

Despite some progress, inequalities between different socio economic groups has not diminished despite apparent rises in retention and enrolment and policies of equal opportunity. The desire of some parents for 'academic passports' for their children can hinder school's ability to experiment, innovate with curriculum and pedagogy (Budge 2000, p. 23).

The OECD reported (OECD 2002) that the gap between the highest and lowest achievers of the same age in Australia is one of the largest and higher than the average equivalent of up to 4 years of schooling. The same organisation's report *Overcoming Failure at School* states that:

'clear leadership at the national level is required to mobilise public opinion around a strategy to combat failure or promote success ...[and that] overcoming failure requires a long term and coordinated effort that matches the complexity of the problem and is supported by ... the school, the community and the home environment.' What is required, the report states is '... early action in order to prevent students "at-risk" from failing in the first place.' (OECD 1998, p. 7)

Both the PENG (*Public Education: The Next Generation*) and Connors' Reports in 2000 points out that schools cannot be expected to do it all themselves:

'... a proactive whole of government approach is needed to reduce persisting inequalities in school achievement that reflect social and economic disadvantage; and that lead to significant numbers of young people leaving school prematurely and becoming marginalised.' (Connors 2000, p. 9)

At the same time the Report suggested that schools take explicit responsibility

'for monitoring the circumstances of all young people of school age in their community, to ensure that they remain engaged in education and training or employment (or a combination of these); and for taking any action that is necessary to connect them with appropriate services.' (Connors 2000, p. 11)

The Kirby report's brief of the same year was (among other things) to research post compulsory pathways that were 'uncertain unequal and poorly signposted' (School Focussed Youth Service 2001, p. 4) Although it found that many young people "fall through the cracks" (Kirby 2000, p. 7) schools it said, not only were being innovative and inventive in their provision of services and programs for young people but that initiatives were being developed at the local level. (Kirby 2000, p. 8)

These reports sought to address the persistent inequality in educational outcome and opportunity for all but in particular the marginalised and most vulnerable young people of Victoria.

The Report from the Prime Ministers Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001b, 2001a) stressed the importance and significance of literacy and numeracy as the foundation skills to prevent students becoming "at-risk" and guarantee success. It states that the capacity of young people to participate in schooling and further study is determined by their literacy and numeracy, quoting ACER longitudinal research that correlates reading and numeracy levels with increased likelihood of early school leaving. It concludes that 'it is impossible to overestimate the importance of early intervention [in literacy and numeracy] in ensuring lifelong learning opportunities' (Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001b, p. 19).

The *Interim Report* (Zyngier & Gale 2003) categorised the programs on the basis of their student focus. The purpose of this abbreviated literature review is to help further categorise

these programs informed by 'good practice' benchmarks. In light of other national and international programs dealing with the issue of student engagement at a systemic and government level, we will further analyse they contribute to an understanding of 'good practice' in addressing student/youth engagement and disengagement.

This review of academic, research literature and government reports is not intended to analyse the causes or nature of "students-at-risk". Why young people leave school early is beyond the scope of this review except in as much as an understanding of the **why** is crucial in determining whether the **how** strategies are effective in dealing with and or ameliorating risk. Nor is it an attempt to 'reinvent wheels' which are already running smoothly! The aim here is to report on the current research into "at-risk" programs that will serve to assist our understanding of what constitutes good practice in order to both categorise existing programs in the local schools and to evaluate the contribution of these programs to assisting students "at-risk".

A number of major reports and meta reviews were consulted². This review will first briefly summarise these analyses and then discuss how their findings contribute to our understanding of best practice programs designed to assist "at-risk" students. This section concludes with reference to the *Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study* (QSRLS) findings in relation to pedagogy and curriculum that 'works' for marginalised students. (Lingard 2001)

We attempt to identify 'good practice' that address the specific needs of students "at-risk", identifying any barriers to the development of good practice and connect good practice to transferability.

One problem many interpretations. The findings - who is "at-risk"?

The Dusseldorp Skills Forum (DSF 2002) reports suggest that at least 15% of 15-24 year olds are neither in any work or in any education. OECD figures estimate somewhere between 15-20% of young people leave school without 'worthwhile' qualification and that 15-30% are classed as "at-risk" of failure in school - a total of 30%-50% are "at-risk" according to these figures! (Budge 2000) This international study of 1999 confirms that there is no single factor associated with education success or its opposite "at-risk". Even countries that appear to be 'motivating their children academically' are well aware that they have troubles of their own.' (Budge 2000, p. 22)

Generally the term is used to describe young people who are vulnerable to and affected by a range of factors likely to impede their successful transition to a fulfilling adult life. However sometimes the term is confused with specific issues faced by young people (teenage pregnancy, suicide, addiction, homelessness, substance abuse and misuse, delinquency and early school leaving) (School Focussed Youth Service 2001, p. 16).

The Australian findings in relation to the causes of "at-risk" are similar to international studies and identify three main issues:

1. non stimulating environment
2. lack of clear relationship to the wider community in the area of support and referral
3. negative teacher student relationships

The diversity of attributes become a cliché of the literature: there is no dominant typification of an early school leaver (DETYA 2001, p. 15) and furthermore we are warned about the dangers of a public discourse that labels schools as welfare and "at-risk" specialists. Teese et al. (2003) has described the socio-geography of disadvantage in particular the area under study, while Thomson (2002) has more broadly described what she calls the 'rustbelt schools' and the 'at-risk industry'.

Those researchers that reject a broad deficit and blame the victim approach point specifically to school related issues of organisation, curriculum and 'climate' as significant factors. Dwyer et al (Dwyer et al. 1998) suggest that there are 3 sorts of early school leavers - those that elect out, drift out and those who are driven out. Teese points out that not all early school

² For a full list of the reports see Appendix.

leaving need be seen as a negative and that for some young people early school departure is a positive and affirming decision. (Teese, R. V. & Polesel 2003)

What seems to work - successful strategies for engaging young people in school

The QSRLS research (Lingard 2001) was concerned with how student learning, both academic and social, could be enhanced. The base assumption of the research was that this enhancement required quality classroom teaching and assessment practices. The QSRLS suggests that all students are capable of quality outcomes in terms of a sustained and disciplined inquiry focused on powerful, important ideas and concepts which are connected to students' experiences and the world in which they live (Lingard, B. et al. 2001a, p. xi).

The QSRLS identified four major challenges confronting school education today; the changing patterns of family poverty, the generation change in the teaching workforce, the apparently destabilising federal policy in relation to state and non state education and declining retention rates, loss of enrolment share and low teacher morale.

In response to these challenges the study's original contribution to the debate is to specify which aspects of teaching require schools' urgent attention.

The key finding of the Report should be no surprise - the higher the level of intellectual demand expected of students by teachers the greater the improved productive performance and, hence, improved student outcomes.

In order for this to be achieved schools and the teachers in the classroom must shift teacher attention from the emphasis on so-called basic skills to higher order thinking - towards what the QSRLS report has termed *productive pedagogies*. Quality learning experience is acknowledged as what our best teachers have always provided for their students - intellectually challenging material that is relevant and connected to the children's lives, recognising that children learn in different ways and have different needs, all done in a supportive class room environment.

This concept of productive pedagogies is gaining recognition nationally as a framework for professional development which focuses on classroom practices whilst foregrounding social justice and equity concerns in education. The presence of all four elements; intellectually challenging material, connectedness, difference and social supportiveness within a particular lesson contributes to the practice of a productive pedagogy.

The research found that it was that students most "at-risk" of failure, from socially, culturally and economically disadvantaged conditions who were the least likely to be exposed to intellectually challenging and relevant material.

It accepts that there is no one **true** or **best** way of teaching and that appropriate teaching for particular contexts need to be determined by the teacher and students and school communities.

One of the things often commented on by parents, students, school communities and even by our politicians, is the level of commitment of teachers to their students, both inside and outside the classroom. Without doubt teachers and their school communities want their students to get the best learning possible. Relevant to this research into non-systemic and non-traditional school programs, the QSRLS Report suggests that the 'structural restraints work against this will in ways which lead to cynicism and often to despair amongst teachers. It is the creation of cultures of despair which has the effects of inhibiting productive changes within schools.' (Lingard, B. et al. 2001b, p. 136)

What can we say about the programs?

Programs can be categorised by their purpose (student focus), where the intervention occurs, what actually takes place in the programs, whether they are preventative or remedial or by their outcomes (stated and /or attained).

In response to the perceived needs of young people "at-risk", programs have either been portrayed as preventive or ameliorative (remedial) as part of an early intervention strategy

(DETYA 2001). Schools then come to be regarded both as part of the problem but also a component of the solution. One approach has been to classify programs according to the level of and approach to the intervention strategies applied.

The OECD reports that the most common approach by schools is to create or offer remedial rather than preventative programs for students “at-risk” (OECD 1986b). The problem of risk is rarely addressed according to this study.

The literature reviewed agrees that positive results can only be achieved for “at-risk” youth with concurrent activity in the school and in response to policy, program and funding decisions at a system level (DETYA 2001).

Student engagement is often cited as crucial for successful programs. It is rarely defined, usually as an opposite of alienation or dis-engagement. Apte suggests that engagement is 'some reference to the idea of "joining" with another person, the process of forming a relationship, of getting to know each other in a way which is meaningful to what you might need to do together' (Apte 2001, p. 42).

The Context of Practice - Measuring Outcomes

If the focus of programs is purely on retention or *hanging out*, it is very difficult to evaluate the results of most programs. Overall retention rates in Australian, Victorian and the schools in this study seem to improve, but the retention rates in the region are still well below those of comparable regions and schools. Assessing the welfare- well being outcomes is not common and very problematic.

One of the problems with actually monitoring and evaluating intervention projects and programs is that they are real world situations and not closed systems or laboratory type experiments - most of these educational projects are not susceptible to standard blind or double blind placebo type experimentation and testing to isolate the key factors. There has been little robust evaluation of programs. 'There is no such thing as a program that is universally successful' - what works in one place may be the result of situational factors and events, the cost of such programs is difficult if not impossible to quantify and educational projects are rarely if ever static, but continue to change and evolve. (Mortimore & Mortimore 1999, p. 114)

Schools are acknowledged in the literature as having a 'critical role' in both prevention and early intervention. School culture is a key variable but there are also many outside factors and therefore successful programs will extend beyond the school but 'how far is still the subject of debate' (DETYA 2001, p. 25) Schools have become the main sites of early identification, tracking and unthreatening first point of contact for “at-risk”.

The research by Brown et al (2001, p. 126) confirms that students “at-risk” also clearly understand that the nature of the school culture and ethos is critical to their attachment to school - in both a positive and negative sense.

The research (Brown & Holdsworth 2001) found that there are 'substantial pressures and barriers within schools that act to restrict or prevent the development of such relationships.' In particular these pressures can be found in the practices and institutions that serve to exclude informally students “at-risk” from school. (Angwin et al. 2001)

Proposals to 'fix' education systems by 'bits and pieces' is rejected by the DETYA report as this 'will not deliver long term sustainable change' (DETYA 2001).

The research of the QSRLS (Lingard 2001) indicates that teachers indeed can 'tip the balance' especially for marginalised students with a Productive Pedagogy approach. Change requires not just a 'proliferation of new practices ... but also whole of school change ... backed up and mandated by systemic guidelines, policies and appropriate resource allocations' (DETYA 2001, p. 26).

Schools are largely responsible for the weak connections between students and their communities as a result of inflexible curriculum pathways, lack of relevance of teaching and learning programs, inadequate skills of teachers, inability to participate in the class and the life of the school. We certainly know what is the issue - the question then is why do schools continue with such practices?

In order to improve the success and outcomes of all but in particular “at-risk” youth school curriculum must be learner centred and focussed on individual needs, interests and concerns, emphasising self direction and constructive learning that include purpose, empowerment rigour and success. (Barratt 1997 *Shaping Middle Schooling in Australia*) while Cumming's (1996) seminal work states that school curriculum must be relevant, negotiated, integrated and connected linking personal, social concerns. School may consider targeting work experience towards young people most “at-risk”, to ensure that negotiated, purposeful and supported work placements are available where they will be of most benefit.

Furthermore Cumming (1997) identifies community based learning (CBL) as part of the community-school partnership essential to improve student learning and enhance community development to re-engage young people with education. (Dwyer 1998:14) CBL to be effective must:

- integrate and connect to academic studies
- be part of the real life in the community
- enhance school knowledge
- use collaborative learning (DETYA 2001, p. 66)

What is required then is a 'fundamental shift in thinking about the purpose and value of education, and how the educational system should fit into the rest of society' (DETYA 2001).

School based versus Systemic Change - Drifting Out

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

Much of the research into student motivation comes from the USA and is psychologically based and not representative of other countries research. 'Dropping [drifting] out is the culmination of a process of disengagement that often begins in the [youngest] class.' (Budge 2000, p. 29)

What constitutes an engaging curriculum is however not specified but it concludes that 'students expect to learn if their teachers expect them to learn.' It quotes one researcher's findings:

'The belief that students only go to school to get qualifications that will secure them well paid job militates against the intrinsic valuing of education for two reasons - it deprives young people of the feeling that what they are doing now is important ... Secondly it deprives society of the understanding that learning has value in itself and not just as a saleable commodity. ... This creates a population of narrowly educated citizens.' (Budge 2000, pp. 34 quoting Tye, 1985)

Most school based initiatives are site specific and reflect specifically targeted interventions - the focus here is on the individual parts of the system - trying to fix up bits of the broken pieces or as Kirby's report (2000) states, stop students “falling through the cracks”. Most programs are supplemental rather than fundamental or mainstream directed at specific 'sub-populations' and remain isolated alternatives to the mainstream. (DETYA 2001, pp. 93-4)

Successful school based initiatives have involved building relationships with the wider community. The literature highlights the need for 'drive and vision' for a 'wider perspective' for leadership to initiate local innovation. 'Sustainable change can only be achieved where there is clear ownership at the local community provider level which supports the structural change' while innovative models are likely to link significantly with related and often parallel programs in the community bringing together different sectors (DETYA 2001, pp. 95-7).

The translation of these research results into improved outcomes has been generally poor – with serious implications for issues of transportability, transferability and replicability. 'A lot of money can be spent in pursuit of limited benefits without some commitment to systemic change.' (DETYA 2001, p. 102) for without appropriate resources for skill development of teachers programs cannot continue. 'Without system change, effective practice that serves

marginalised or “at-risk” young people will either remain localised, and/or dissipate as resources shrink and creative energy is exhausted. The proliferation of innovative activities for “at-risk” young people represents a groundswell of commitment ...’ (DETYA 2001, p. 102)

Being Driven Out

Angwin et al (2001) refer to the research in the UK by Wright et al, in their study of the effects of race, class and gender on school exclusions in the UK (2000) that acknowledges the effects of school cultures on retention rates. The research highlights that while schools are being forced to compete against each other the “challenging few” are viewed as a danger to the educational chances of the mainstream, well behaved majority. Marginalised students are stereotyped as “deviant” and like the pathology view of “at-risk” are seen as capable of “contaminating” the school culture making parents think twice before sending their children to the local school. This view produces a school culture that places an emphasis on discipline and “correct behaviour” and programs are then designed to ‘reinforce structures that have broken down’ (2000, p. 35), rather than question the structures themselves.

The research acknowledges that schools play a critical role in the prevention and early intervention programs for “at-risk” youth, but much of this work appears to be fragmented with individualistic approaches that can be often ineffective at best and at worst detrimental. Achieving improved participation, retention and achievement levels increasingly necessitates the need to deal with students from lower socio-economic status, rural areas and those who have little engagement with schools. ‘Changing the patterns [of success] for these groups needs to commence in the early years of schooling and continue through the post compulsory years’ (The Allen Consulting Group 2003, p. 4).

Research has found that there are significant numbers of “at-risk” being suspended or excluded or becoming chronic absentees (truants) and that often school practices do not encourage the retention of these “problem” students. ‘The phenomenon of rapidly rising participation and retention has had little effect on class inequalities in educational attainment’ (Angwin et al. 2001). Schools too often respond by practices that lead to inexorably to opting out, to informal exclusion by maintaining environments that do not engage students, insisting on curriculum content that is too difficult or irrelevant curriculum, alienating students through poor teacher student relations or failure to provide alternative learning opportunities (Young 2000, p. 150). In effect they are as Dwyer (Dwyer et al. 1998) and Apte suggest, being “driven out” from school. Angwin et al (Angwin et al. 2001) list the following factors, ‘discipline, correction and reward structures’ (the school ethos) can that have either a positive or negative influence on retention of early school leavers.

Barriers that currently prevent students “at-risk” achieving their potential are to be found in teaching, in pedagogy and schools that are not connected to the students’ world. Some common themes across the studies are that:

- It is easier to change the system than the student
- Involving participants in planning convinces teachers of the value of change
- Innovation works best if it is both top down and bottom up
- Trying to implement budget cuts while introducing innovation is inappropriate
- Giving greater local decision making powers increases efficiency but can have unintended side effects
- The needs of students “at-risk” are given less consideration in a market driven education system
- Focussing on school efficiency is detrimental to the school system

There is no conclusive evidence in the literature that students have improved achievement or altered patterns of learning through the development or implementation of remediation type programs (Mortimore & Mortimore 1999, p. 128)

It is hardly surprising that students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not do as well as their advantaged peers. In the end the advantaged have always gained more from intervention initiatives than the disadvantaged - resulting in the students “at-risk” falling further behind their peers and making it even harder to alter the pattern of inequality of outcomes.

Willis (1999) and Thomson (2002) caution the focus on individual needs unless 'you believe that student needs are determined by the class and ethnic geographic nature of the parent community or by the values of the parent community.' The danger here is that programs deemed "appropriate" for working class children will be developed by middle class teachers that will only serve to further protect the privilege of the middle class students.

Good Practice programs - what do they look like?

This meta-literature review highlighted at least 178 differently named characteristics of good practice from the research literature. Using the N*UDIST NVivo software program to assist in qualitative analysis these characteristics were grouped on the basis of their focus. The numbers after each indicate the number of different characteristics that could be "bundled" together. Note that some characteristics were placed into more than one group.

Program Focus

- real life issues of immediate relevance (13)
- integration into mainstream (10)
- use integrated approach across many subject areas (7)
- separate streaming - withdrawal (2)
- emphasis on basic skills and remediation (1)

Student Focus

- student well being (20)
- responding to student needs (17)
- students having control of their lives - student empowerment (12)
- high expectations and challenge (10)
- long term training and future needs(9)
- student involvement in planning (7)
- students as active learners (5)

Teacher Focus

- importance of positive student teacher relationships (17)
- selection of quality teachers and continuous teacher training(14)
- school leadership and vision (2)

Community Focus

- community connectedness – involvement of and engagement with students' world(21)
- collaboration with community organisations and groups(8)

We suggest that there may be some agreement between the research on the following:

1. Alternative programs should be both mainstream and relevant, reflecting real world problems. They should not be focussing on remediation or basic skills, nor should they be based on withdrawal or separate programs for the few chosen to participate.
2. Alternative programs must be socially supportive, be intellectually challenging and respond to student needs both current and in the long term.
3. The selection and training of the participating teachers is crucial, while it can be inferred that leadership "from above" is less vital
4. Alternative programs must actively involve and be connected to the students' world and the community

The Research

The "at-risk" issue for many schools in this study is highlighted by the disproportionately large enrolments of students "at-risk" into individual schools - a fact not recognised/acknowledged by policy makers and central administrators. Although changes in curriculum and pedagogy will be beneficial, the concentration of students "at-risk" in particular schools 'at the bottom of the pecking order' can create a culture of disadvantage within the community further compounding the situation. Even research into students "at-risk" at such schools can cause a flight to 'more balanced school populations.' (Mortimore & Mortimore 1999, p. 131) Publication

of comparative academic results, League Tables etc can only accentuate this *flight* of cultural capital. Alleviation of the actual disadvantage in these cases may be more useful than localised school interventions. A better solution is to try and raise the standard of as many schools as possible so that "choice" becomes less of an imperative for families. However as 'more and more people desire access to fewer and fewer schools' the issue of social and cultural capital is further accentuated (Teese, R. V. & Polesel 2003). It is 'impossible to make a fair judgement of what [a school is doing] without taking into account the nature of its student intake. ... It is foolish to pretend that the social background of the students makes no difference' (Mortimore & Mortimore 1999, p. 131)

Interim Findings of Research

Of the 18 secondary schools in the area, all government schools have provided information about their non-systemic and non-traditional programs. It has been difficult to quantify exactly the number of these programs operating in schools that focus on:

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

This is because schools have not always clearly articulated the specific purposes of some programs and how they address the above issues. Alternatively, some teachers were reluctant to suggest that what they were doing was "relevant" to these interests. To date, over 40 different school programs have been identified.

Program Categorization and Characterization

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

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

TABLE 1 PROGRAM CATEGORIES AND CHARACTERISTICS

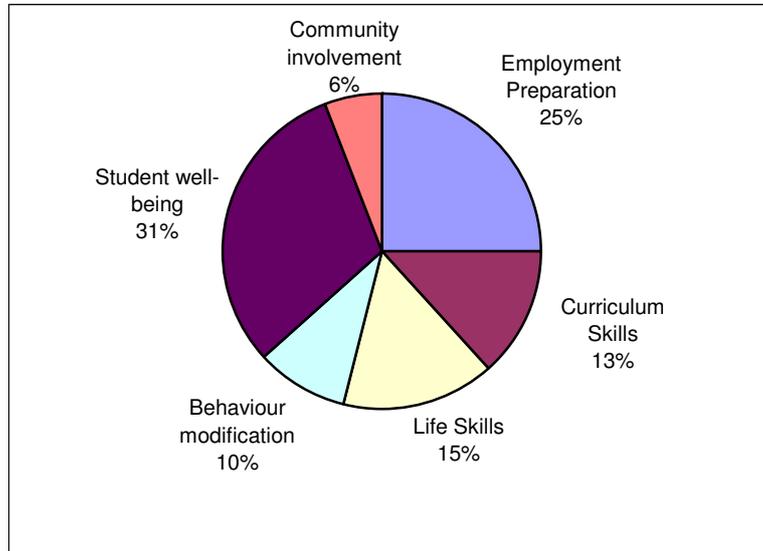
Student Focus (categories)	Program Intentions (characteristics)
<i>Program or Curriculum Focus</i>	To improve students' essential / basic skills, to facilitate continued study at school.
<i>Student Well-being</i>	To develop students' self-confidence, self-esteem and related social skills, and improve the mental and physical health of students, to facilitate continued study at school.
<i>Behaviour Modification</i>	To deal with / attempt to modify students' inappropriate social behaviours (as defined by the school) that hinder the development of a positive learning environment and individual academic progress, in order to facilitate students' continued study at school.
<i>Community Involvement</i>	To link students to and/or work with and in the community, but does not involve work experience, in order to facilitate continued study at school.
<i>Life or Practical skills</i>	To develop in students the essential skills for productive adult participation in society, as preparation for leaving school.
<i>Employment Preparation</i>	To provide counselling, discussion and research to assist students find appropriate work or vocational training, in preparation for leaving school.

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

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

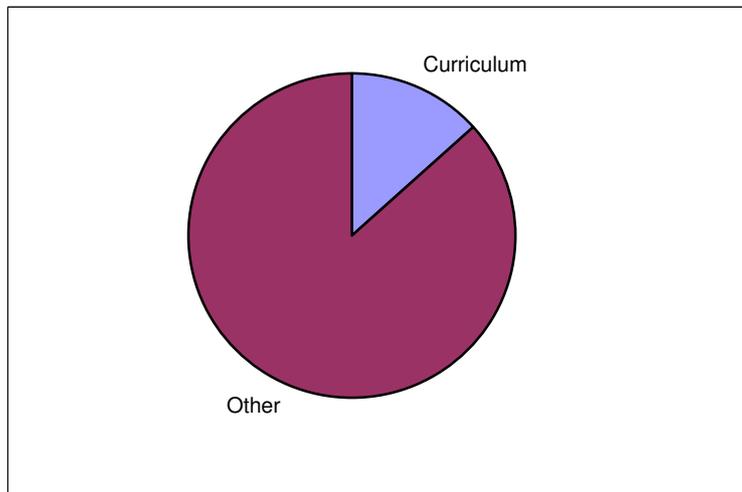
Also of significance is that only 6% of programs (3) have community involvement as a part of their focus.

GRAPH 1 STUDENT FOCUS OF PROGRAMS



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

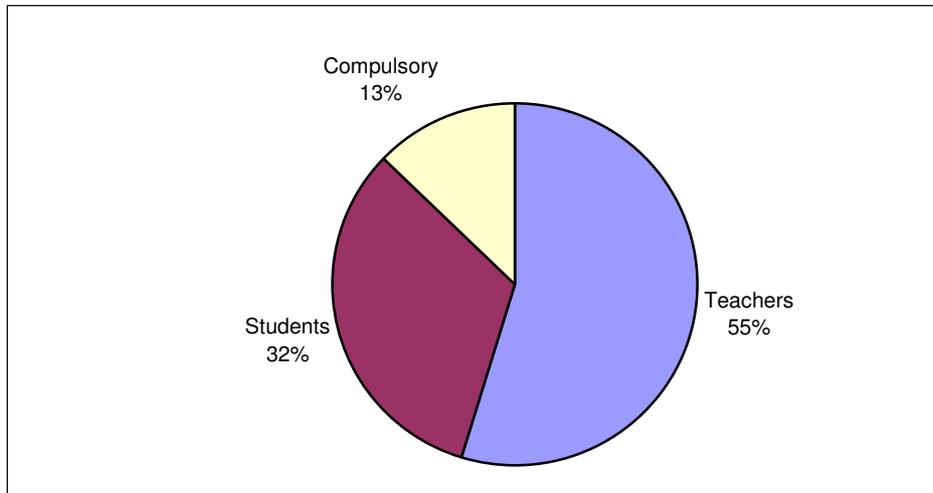
GRAPH 2 PROGRAMS BY FOCUS – CURRICULUM



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

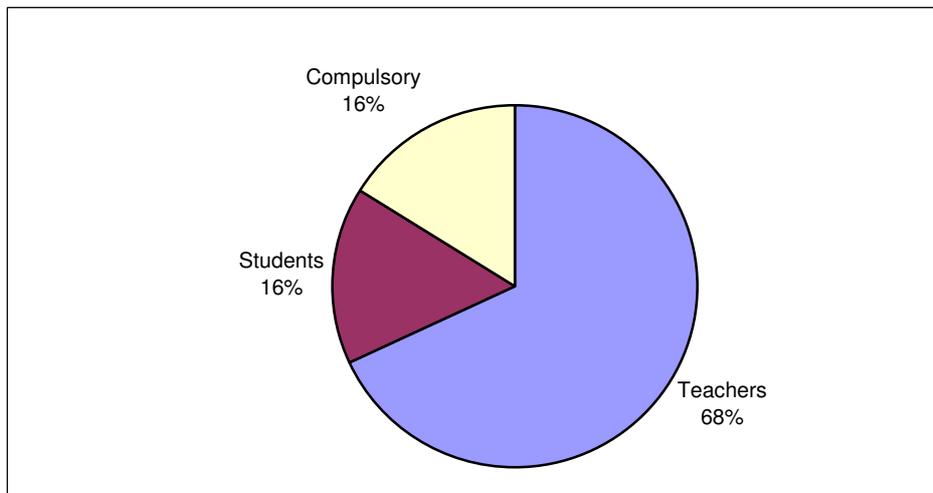
The extent to which students can choose to participate in these programs is also of interest. Of all the programs, only 13% (4) are compulsory for all students in a cohort (usually a year level).

GRAPH 3 “WHO CHOOSES” PROGRAM? (1)



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

GRAPH 4 “WHO CHOOSES” PROGRAM? (2)



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

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

Towards a new Generative Pedagogy

What I have termed a *Generative Pedagogy* extends Productive Pedagogies by combining it with agency. Quality student outcomes require a sustained, relevant and disciplined inquiry focused on powerful or important ideas and concepts that are connected to students' experiences and the world in which they live. These must also include the crucial element of action for social justice and social change (Shor 1996).

This concept of Generative Pedagogy is derived from Giddens' notion of a generative politics (1994, p. p. 93) and social reflexivity or agency. It is the connecting link between education and questions of combating poverty, absolute or relative, redressing the degradation of the environment; contesting arbitrary power; reducing the role of violence and force in social life (Giddens 1994, pp. pp. 293-4).

Giddens suggests that social change occurs when people become more active and reflexive, 'where the past has lost its hold. Or becomes one "reason" among others for doing what one does, pre-existing habits are only a limited guide to action; while the future, open to numerous "scenarios", becomes of compelling interest.' Reflexive agency demands increased "visibility" of social relations and at the same time also acts to increase this visibility (Giddens 1994, pp. pp. 92-4).

Giddens explains that generative politics exist in the **space** that links the state to reflexive mobilisation in society at large. Generative politics is based on individuals and groups taking action to create and increase social justice, making things happen rather than having things done to or happening to them. In Giddens' words 'Generative politics is a defense of the politics of the *public domain* ... the main means of effectively approaching problems of poverty and social exclusion...' (1994, p. p. 15).

Giddens' allusion above to **space** and further that 'the whole population lives in the same discursive **space** ... [to] produce major new political dilemmas and contradictions' (1994, p. p. 15) recalls de Certeaus' (1988) notion of the spaces and cracks available for political action and counter hegemonic opposition in a reproductive society.

Much of the literature on "risk" reflects a structural/deficit response. These responses, no matter how much they seem to champion social justice and equity are inevitably couched in the discredited language of deficit.

The central issue at stake is equity. Whether equality is attainable is in the end a political question and not one that education alone can or should be responsible for (Knight 2002, pp. p. 85, p. 104). The deficit model is another form of the oppression and violence described by Bourdieu, (Bourdieu, Pierre & Passeron 1990) where treating the learner as a victim inhibits the full development of the potential of the learner.

These responses to disengagement and alienation is to provide solutions to the future welfare of "at risk" populations mainly through the provision of additional resources and reworked programs to promote equal treatment and equality of opportunity on the assumption that this will then lead to improved and equal results for all. This is done with the belief that it will even out the life chances for children at risk including indigenous children (Knight 2002). For them the solution is always resource based - more money, more teachers, more computers and more schools in order to overcome deficits that the children have as a result of their circumstances.

Focussing on the need to "get them young" defines alleged student shortcomings in social and cultural capital as the real issue to be resolved, ignoring the effects of school structures; curriculum and pedagogical irrelevance; disjuncture and disengagement of students (Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001b).

So long as educators and administrators work on the premise that education has the ability to transform the personal and social futures of the disadvantaged as a group, schools will continue to operate in the deficit mode of thinking. Individuals will no doubt benefit, but while there are no serious work choices for the disadvantaged youth and a decline in alternative pathways for "at risk" students then only students in the privileged group of society will be guaranteed the success that can come from a schooling that serves to extend social advantage to the few at the expense of the majority (Knight 2002, p. 101; Teese, R. V. & Polesel 2003).

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

A *Generative Pedagogy* is different because it implies an action for social justice element entrenched in the curriculum and the pedagogy of the classroom. Without this, the institutional response to students' disengagement/disconnection from schooling remains confined to structural and programmatic solutions. Not just in relation to curriculum content that is presented by the teacher in the classroom but also in the national and systemic reactions to the social justice issues of equity and disadvantage.

Connectedness and social justice in the classroom

If the 'tail of the test wag[ging] the body of the curriculum' (Apple & Beane 1999, p. xii) is to be replaced with a more empowering pedagogy teachers and schools will need to begin to question their own practices in the classroom. They will need to ask and find answers to the following:

1. To what extent is school knowledge integrated across subject boundaries?
2. To what extent are links with students' background knowledge made explicit?
3. To what extent do classroom activities or tasks make it clear that what is learned in lessons is, or will be, of some use-value outside of the school in 'the real world'?
4. To what extent are classroom activities and tasks based on the resolution of a specific and realistic problem(s)?
5. Do we unintentionally doubly disadvantage the already disadvantaged students by serving them up more of the "basics" and "busy work" instead of actively engaging their intelligence?
6. Whose vision of "real life" counts in education?

Conclusion

There is sufficient research to indicate that teachers have 'the power to tip the scale from risk to engagement. A proliferation of student programs will not necessarily meet the needs of students "at-risk". It can be concluded that the real need is for both school re-organisation and pedagogical change accompanied by a shift in the definition of student success to be greater than just hanging out, hanging on or hanging in - retention, attendance and academic achievement. It requires a shift in focus to include social measures, connectedness which may be more important in the long term than mere academic achievement for the health and well being and future social and cultural capital building urgently required for marginalised and "at-risk" youth. On the other hand it is pointed out that schools are probably a lot easier to change than either the family or individual factors. The research indicates that while some schools do succeed 'against the odds' and challenge the structural inequalities that are at the core of risk, it is not likely that many schools can achieve this same result given the long term patterns of socio-economic-educational inequality that pervades our society. In fact Mortimer's findings indicate that the relative performance of disadvantaged youth remains stable even when the absolute performance of students "at-risk" and their associated socio economic group improve (Mortimore & Mortimore 1999, p. 113).

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

Appendix: Reports Reviewed

The Literature Reviewed

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

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

National Research

The following major reports and meta reviews were analysed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study 2001

International research

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

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

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

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<http://www.mszs.si/eurydice/pub/oecd/kurikulum.pdf>

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