FRAMING CURRICULUM FOR AT RISK STUDENTS

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Introduction

For the last decade or so in Australia there has been increasing concern that early school leavers have uncertain futures. By early school leavers we have come to mean those who do not complete Year 12. While arguments still may be heard that school is not the best place for some young people, there is little doubt now that chances of obtaining work are very slight for any young person who has not completed school. And even that is now not enough. Everyone will need to go on learning, not only to obtain employment, but also to live productively in a society which is becoming more complex, global and technology driven.

Background

State and Commonwealth Governments have grappled with policies and target setting to encourage greater participation by young people in education and training. The significant rises in school retention in the 80s plateaued by the early nineties, and in most states and territories the rates have since fallen. The Finn targets which were agreed early this decade have not been met (Finn 1991). Nor have have they been the subject of national focus for some time. This is beginning to change with the challenge of solving broader issues which confront young people. The report from the Prime Minister’s Youth Homelessness Taskforce (Eldridge 1998) and research from the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (1998) and (Curtain 1999), among other publications, provide an analysis of the issues and some ways forward. In all the proposed solutions education is seen to play a vital role.

The extent of the problem is quite significant. If we examine national figures for 1998 on the activities of 15 to 19 year olds, 76.9% were attending education and training while 8.8% were unemployed or not in the labour force. There were 114,434 of the 15 to 19 year olds either unemployed or not in the labour force, and of these 80,866 had not completed their secondary schooling (ABS 1998 - See Appendix).

Recent work undertaken for the Dusseldorp Skills Forum by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling estimates that in any one year the number of school students who do not complete their schooling and subsequently undertake no further formal education and training is 35,000.

Definitions of at risk students vary but they can be seen as young people who “are at serious risk of failing in school and, as a result, will not possess sufficient skills or qualifications to become integrated into accepted patterns of family, social and working life” (Mortimore and Mortimore 1999:5).

The problems of the young people who are not succeeding in education have been a concern for some years, but are we making much headway? The importance of continuing participation in education by all young people has been an ongoing issue for curriculum stakeholders (Anwyl 1991, 1995).
Recent Policy Directions

A recent major policy change by the Commonwealth has highlighted the need for urgent attention to be paid by State and Commonwealth education authorities to the implementation of curriculum which engages all young people in education.

The Commonwealth introduced the Youth Allowance in 1998. The policy change was made as a response to community concerns, particularly “the changing labour market, the need for flexibility, the need for simplicity and the need to remove disincentives to study”. The changing labour market is recognised as less likely to allow young people to move from full-time study to full-time employment, thus increasing their likelihood of having part-time, casual and temporary employment, combining employment with study or training or involvement in short intensive vocational courses (Macfadyen and Pettingill 1999:9).

The introduction of the Youth Allowance was accompanied, in January 1999, with the requirement that 16 and 17 year olds must be full-time in education and training for the payment of the Allowance, which is in fact paid to their parents. While exemptions were allowed, the intention was that young people would remain on at school or return to education and training. The implication of this policy change was that many under 18 year olds would return to school. Generally this has not occurred.

There is little available data to indicate the range of education and training that many Youth Allowance recipients are undertaking. One complication in evaluating the activities of 16 and 17 year olds is that it appears that Centrelink officers have granted exemptions to a significant number of them. While this provides a short term solution to allowing young people to keep on receiving an allowance, it is not consistent with the policy of having them engage in education. Evaluation of the Youth Allowance should indicate some solutions.

Responses

With the introduction of the Youth Allowance, young people’s engagement or re-engagement in education and training suggested that new programs and arrangements were necessary. The Commonwealth introduced the Full Service Schools Programme (FSS), a two-year initiative, with its major objective being to encourage young people to remain at school and complete a full education, that is to the end of Year 12. It provides resources for alternative programs and arrangements for 16 and 17 year olds. Each State in Australia is implementing the Programme within guidelines provided by the Commonwealth (DETYA 1999). Victoria’s FSS Programme will be discussed later in the paper.

Other major Commonwealth initiatives for under 18 year olds include the Jobs Pathway Programme which in 2000 will again have a focus on retention as well as transition to work.

States too have a range of programs and policies for at risk students. But in general these are not well documented or evaluated.
Curriculum

What principles should inform the framing of curriculum for at risk students?

Considerable research findings point the direction. The OECD has examined the kinds of programs used by member countries to overcome the problems of educational failure. These are categorised as two major approaches – that of targeted projects and network development (OECD 1998). Australia has had a history of targeted projects since the seventies and there has been an expectation that additional resources will help to solve a range of problems for the educationally disadvantaged. There is still strong demand for additional resources by schools who undertake anything other than mainstream curriculum.

The network approach has not been widely recognised at the system level in Australia although it has grown in importance at the local level. It provides a means of utilising expertise, resources and good will, and there are numerous examples of how it is a cost effective means of changing attitudes and practices.

Research projects were undertaken in Victoria as a basis for planning for programs which supported young people expected to be in education as a result of the introduction of the Youth Allowance. These were known as the Successful Learning Projects. The first of these (Dwyer, Stokes, Tyler and Holdsworth 1998) focused on the impact of the Youth Allowance on young people and what they had to say about their educational experiences. It also canvassed the barriers to and options for their participation in education and training. A second report (Ward, St Leger, Beckett and Harper 1998) documented a variety of programs and resources which were available – in schools, TAFE and the community – and analysed the characteristics of what worked. The third report (Robinson, Fleming and Withers) examined ways of evaluating student growth and measuring the value added by the programs the students undertook, as well as the nature of those learning programs. A fourth report (King 1999) documented a project in four Victorian schools where business people mentored at risk students. A number of recommendations from these reports were incorporated into the development of Victoria’s FSS Programme.

Many of the findings from the Successful Learning research are not new. Such things as better student teacher relationships, positive reinforcement of learning outcomes, experiential learning, and the opportunity to apply classroom learning in the real world have all been known as contributors to the educational engagement of students.

In examining the policies and practices needed to improve the educational performance of at risk youth, Mortimore and Mortimore (op. cit.) argue that a range of learning activities is needed by these young people and that local circumstances and the need for flexibility must be taken into account. They also point out that many initiatives for at risk youth are often not evaluated in detail and thus there are few conclusive research findings.

Victorian FSS Programme

The Victorian Programme took the Commonwealth guidelines and incorporated them into a broader approach which was designed to bring together schools and other key
players in their area to share resources, expertise and good will. The 8 Programmes are all in Local Government Areas so that regional boundaries are readily identifiable. It signalled the intention to include local government as one of the stakeholders and also to engage the local community in projects. The structure of the Area Network Committees, discussed later, was designed to encourage greater involvement of all local key players.

Initially the following principles were agreed as underpinning the development of Victorian projects in the Full Service Schools (FSS) Programme:

• A cross sectoral approach, that is across government and non government schools and across education sectors, including schools, TAFE, private providers and universities

• A network approach that brings together local education providers, industry, government departments, and the community, including local government

• The development or further maintenance of links with support services and government agencies

• The identification and development of innovative programs and assessment to challenge the young people, together with recognition through certification, articulation and other arrangements.

• The availability of appropriate materials for these students in as flexible a manner as possible, including online

• Integration with other programs designed to support young people such as those being implemented under the drug and youth suicide strategies

• Professional Development for teachers and others

• The development of appropriate strategies for informing all stakeholders

• Close links with the State Government’s Budget funding for supporting schools in meeting the anticipated increased demand for services as a result of the Commonwealth’s eligibility changes to its Youth Allowance.

When schools were invited to participate in the Programme they were advised as follows:

“FSS Programme funding is to be applied to projects which include such characteristics as:
• are relevant to the students’ culture and the community they live in
• meet the student’s individual needs and build on their previous experience
• involve practical and experiential learning, including in the community, in workplaces and in non traditional settings
• incorporate student negotiation, working cooperatively with others and in teams
• enhance written and oral communication skills
• are given credit and are explicit about what they lead to
• challenge conventional school organisational structures
• provide flexible student teacher ratios and arrangements
• involve enthusiastic, committed teachers and others who relate well to the students and have high expectations of them.” (Full Service Schools Steering Committee 1998)

Projects

Because decisions on projects were made at the local level, each of the 8 Programme Areas proposed a range of initiatives to suit the needs of students they were responsible for. As the Programme is targeted to 16 and 17 year olds, many of the students are in Year 10 with some in Year 11.

There were variations in the ways in which decisions were made about the final proposals, but a number of common elements have emerged. The FSS Programme has only been in place for one term so that not all proposed activities are underway.

The curriculum approaches include:

Vocational Learning
Many schools have seen positive results from their students’ involvement in vocational learning. A range of activities is being undertaken across all Areas and almost all involve attendance at a TAFE provider and often work placements as well. For example, some Year 10 students are involved in Options for Work and Education which is a ten weeks program with two days training and work experience and three days at school. Already this initiative has shown that students are motivated to continue at school after experiencing the program.

Literacy and Numeracy
In a number of Areas young people are working with the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. In some cases they attend the local neighborhood house or community learning centre and in other cases an ACE tutor works with small groups at the school.

Community Projects
Closer links with the community were encouraged in the Programme and this is leading to the development of new partnerships between schools and local organisations. In one Area, students are working with the local community arts centre to gain vocational skills in a range of aspects of theatre. This involves working on set building, performance, script writing and lighting with community arts performers and others. Another group of schools is working with its regional TAFE institute to build cubby houses for local organisations. In a county area students are undertaking a promotional project for their town developing and using their information technology skills.

Life Skills
These projects vary in the way they are delivered. In many case community and other organisations work with groups of students across a number of schools to improve their confidence and engage them in out of classroom activities such as fitness
courses, dance and drama, and motivational programs. These projects often have appealing titles, such as “Get Up and Do It!”, “Mind, Body and Spirit”, and “LEAP” (Leadership, Enterprise, Achievement, Progress). Some projects are deliberately targeted to only one gender.

**Case Management**
Several Areas have employed case managers who negotiate programs on behalf of students and then support and monitor their progress. Case management varies in the way it is structured. For example in some Areas there is close liaison with the Job Placement and Training Programme (JPET) where intervention strategies for supporting the at risk students have already been developed. In other Areas case managers were appointed for all schools involved and they take on the coordination role of other projects in the FSS Programme.

**Professional Development**
Professional Development for teachers was seen as fundamental to the Programme and some Areas are already working on strategies to be implemented later. There will also be some statewide support for teachers through the publication of the *Successful Learning Chronicle* which will be an occasional newsletter with information on successful projects and strategies for at risk students. As well, regional and statewide events for teachers, students and others will be held in 2000.

**Networks**

The concept of Area Network Committees was mandated as a structure for cooperation in curriculum development and as a way of engaging a range of stakeholders in the Programme. While it is still early, there is certainly evidence that bringing together a number of key players at the local level is proving productive. Across the 8 Areas Committee members include: schools, TAFE, universities, local government, non government organisations, employers and employer organisations, Group Training Companies, Area Consultative Committees and government departments.

The importance and role of many key players in network arrangements is not well understood or documented. An examination of one of these players, for example universities, shows that their involvement can extend their traditional role and strengthen their collaboration with others in solving social problems (Anwyl 1999).

In the FSS Programme schools themselves have formed new networks and this is resulting in cooperation in jointly delivering programs and the exchange of students and teachers between schools.

The evaluation of the Programme will investigate how the networks in the Programme develop and how they assist in the sharing of expertise and resources to benefit students at risk.

**Conclusion**

In framing curriculum for at risk students we need to ensure that a range of learning activities is available. We also must offer success to the students as they achieve in
these activities. There will be variations according to local circumstances. Teachers will need to take risks and show patience and persistence with their at risk students. They will also need time to reflect with other teachers and professionals on what works and why. They will need time to read about this too. Above all, in framing the curriculum for at risk students we need to know that whole communities are willing to be involved and that schools alone cannot and should not try to solve all the problems themselves. The challenge is to establish ongoing networks where schools in partnership with communities can bring about change.

References


Dwyer, Peter, Stokes, Helen, Tyler, Debra and Holdsworth, Roger (1998) *Negotiating Staying and Returning: Young People’s Perspectives on Schooling and the Youth Allowance*, Department of Education, Victoria

Eldridge, David (Chair, Prime Ministerial Youth Homelessness Taskforce) (1998) *Putting Families in the Picture: Early Intervention into Youth Homelessness*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra


Macfadyen, Cameron, and Pettingill Darryl (1999) *Report on Youth Allowance and associated payments for young people*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra


## Appendix

### 15 to 19 Year Olds and their activities, Australia 1998

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
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<td><strong>Attending Education and Training</strong></td>
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Source: ABS, Transition from Education to Work Survey, May (Cat. No. 6227.0)